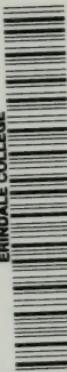


HAMLET  
N IDEAL PRINCE

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EXANDER W. CRAWFORD

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STUDIES IN ENGLISH LITERATURE



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# HAMLET, AN IDEAL PRINCE

AND OTHER ESSAYS IN

## SHAKESPEAREAN INTERPRETATION

*Hamlet; Merchant of Venice; Othello; King Lear*

BY

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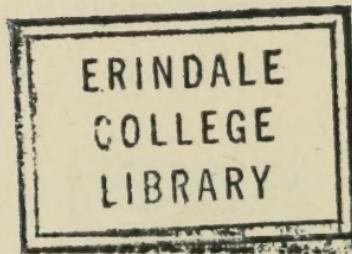
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Made in the United States of America  
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TO THE MEMORY OF  
THE LATE  
PROFESSOR HIRAM CORSON, M.A., LL.D., LITT.D.  
OF CORNELL UNIVERSITY,  
WHO FIRST TAUGHT ME THAT THERE ARE  
MORE THINGS IN — SHAKESPEARE  
THAN ARE DREAMT OF IN OUR PHILOSOPHY.



## PREFACE

THE three hundredth year of Shakespeare's death seems an appropriate time to offer to the public new interpretations of some of the great dramatist's greatest plays. The earnest study of the past three centuries has by no means exhausted the wealth of meaning contained in these master-pieces. The present Shakespeare revival not only discloses an increasing interest in the dramas as plays, but reveals a recognition beyond that of any preceding age of their inestimable educational value as an unequalled part of the world's great literature. It is clear that both as plays and as literature the dramas of Shakespeare are assuming greater importance in the intellectual and spiritual life of the world.

It is therefore highly desirable that the plays should be studied anew in the light of our present knowledge of his times, and of our present attitude toward them as works of literature and dramatic art. Dramas that have so many of the qualities of great literature are likely to meet with more adequate comprehension by later ages than by their own contemporaries, for as Ben Jonson said, they are for all time.

No further excuse, then, is needed for another attempt to interpret some of the plays than the fact that we do not feel satisfied with existing interpretations. There is doubtless more in Shakespeare than critics have as yet succeeded in bringing out, and we shall not rest satisfied until we understand him. Shakespeare is not misty or obscure, but he is profound, and it will take

many more generations of scholars to exhaust his great wealth of meaning.

Like all students of any literature I am indebted to the many scholars and critics who have worked in the field before me, but like every student of Shakespeare I am under a special obligation to Dr. Furness's *Variorum* editions of the plays. These scholarly editions contain most of the materials necessary for a careful study of both the text and the criticism of the plays. But for the attitude I have taken toward the plays as works of dramatic art and interpretations of human life I am indebted more than to any other to my former teacher, the late Professor Hiram Corson of Cornell University.

The view of *Hamlet* herein presented was first published in the *University Magazine* (Montreal), April, 1910, but the essay has been entirely re-written and expanded beyond what was possible within the narrow limits of a magazine article. The other essays have not previously been published, though their substance has been given to several generations of students in my classes.

All quotations of Shakespeare's texts occurring in the essays are taken from Furness's *Variorum* editions, though modern spellings have been adopted.

A. W. CRAWFORD.

University of Manitoba,  
June, 1916.

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## INTRODUCTORY

THE INTERPRETATION OF SHAKESPEARE



# HAMLET, AN IDEAL PRINCE

## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTORY

THE INTERPRETATION OF SHAKESPEARE

#### I

ACH age since Shakespeare has had its own method of approach to his plays, and has consequently had its own interpretations. The chief characteristic of the present study of Shakespeare is that it is endeavoring to look at his plays as dramas and as Elizabethan productions. There are still, however, some writers of the present day who do neither of these things.

There have been since the early days of the drama two types of dramatic construction. In the first of these the story has been the point of greatest interest; and in the other the characters have assumed the greatest importance and the story has become but a place for the characters to exhibit themselves. The Miracle Plays were constructed for the one purpose of teaching the people the Bible stories, and the narrative was, therefore, all-important. The Morality Plays, on the other hand, contained only a very slender and often poorly constructed narrative, and their purpose was to set before the people the nature of the various vir-

tues and vices. Both types of plays necessarily consisted of both character and plot, but in the one the story was emphasized, and in the other the characters.

This distinction may be observed throughout the entire history of the drama. Some of the dramatists make everything of the story, while others make everything of the characters. Marlowe, the first of the great dramatists, places the dramatic emphasis upon the story, which he takes either from history or from some well-known legend, though he does not by any means neglect the elucidation of his characters. Ben Jonson's plays, on the other hand, are slim narratives, usually of his own invention, upon which he suspends his characters. His plays are full of episodes which do not help forward the plot, but are intended only as exhibitions of character. Shakespeare, in the construction of his plays, and under the inspiration of his own genius, followed the line laid out by Marlowe, and chose his narratives from the historians, or from the earlier dramatists and novelists. He seldom invented his own stories, as did Jonson, but utilized the familiar stories, and breathed into them a new life and depth of meaning that made them the vehicles of his own conceptions of life and conduct.

In the hand of Shakespeare, then, the drama is primarily a fictitious narrative, and belongs to the literature of stories. It does not follow, however, that he has in any way neglected his characters. He is indeed the one supreme dramatist who develops both character and story, but who develops his characters always entirely within his narratives. Unlike Jonson, who apparently first conceived his characters and then invented his stories to suit them, Shakespeare seems first to have

selected his narratives, and then with consummate skill to have developed his characters.

## II

Shakespeare's dramas are, therefore, first of all stories, but stories in which the characters are real persons whom we come to know only as we see their exits and their entrances. Forgetting this, critics have spent much energy upon quite useless character studies, as if the dramas were sets of character poses, or studies in still life. Even in such dramatists as Jonson we know the characters only by what they do, for they have no existence outside the dramas, and cannot be considered apart from the narratives. But in Shakespeare's drama the narrative is the thing. It is therefore fatal to a proper interpretation of his works to disregard, as some critics have done, and to discard, as others have done, certain elements of the stories as having no significance for an understanding of his plays.

The simple truth is that it is in the stories rather than in the characters of his dramas that Shakespeare reveals the creative imagination and intelligence of the true dramatist. The very fact that he invented *de novo* very few of his stories, but took them from earlier literature, indicates that to him the narrative was the first requisite for a drama. In the case of those he borrowed he frequently changed the story to make it serve better the genius of his thought, and in every instance improved both the story and the characters. As the one incomparable genius, he understood the true relations of all the dramatic elements, and stamped his mind and his view of life quite as

much upon his narratives as upon his characters. In fact, it is the plot that gives character to his persons of the drama, not the persons to the plot. There is probably no turn of plot or development of narrative that has not been thought out in a manner that will best develop his own independent dramatic purpose. He was the perfect master of narrative, and moulded it thoroughly into the form that would completely express his thoughts and his view of human life.

In the case of a dramatist who gives so much attention to the construction of his plots and the development of his narratives as Shakespeare, it is especially important to study carefully the conclusions and issues of the dramas. As with the entire course of the dramatic narrative, there is every reason for thinking that he framed them in every case after his own ideas of dramatic appropriateness. To assume with Dr. Johnson and many later critics that Shakespeare spent no thought on his conclusions is only to show that thought is not easily recognized when expended upon the construction of a drama. There is no evidence of carelessness, whatever, and the only proper attitude for the critic is to assume that in every particular the conclusions are as Shakespeare wished them. The destinies assigned to the various persons of the drama probably conform exactly to his conceptions of poetic justice. In Shakespeare, character makes destiny, and the destiny assigned to any person of the drama is likely to be the dramatist's verdict upon that person's character.

## III

It is high time for us to permit Shakespeare to be the author of his own dramas, and to regard him as

at least as good an interpreter of life as the critics. We have not yet entirely outlived the eighteenth century notion that Shakespeare is sadly in need of critical revision, though nothing profitable has ever come out of that conception. Let us conclude that Shakespeare, like other great authors, probably said what he meant and meant what he said, and grant him the privilege of saying, "What I have written I have written."<sup>1</sup>

But Shakespeare is an Elizabethan dramatist. Of late there has arisen a fantastic and imaginative type of criticism that endeavors to make Shakespeare thoroughly modern, and refuses to admit Elizabethan notions at all. There is no doubt an absolute value in such great works of art as the Shakespearean dramas, but the best can be got from them only if they are regarded as sixteenth century productions. Shakespeare's ideas have not been outgrown, but they are best seen in their original setting. We have not advanced so much that the greatest thoughts of the greatest Englishman on matters of human life have been outgrown in the process of time since Elizabeth's day. At any rate there need be no hesitation in letting Shakespeare shoulder his own responsibility without undue solicitude on the part of after generations.

Another phase of the modernizing spirit is seen in the disposition of some critics to reject any plain interpretation of Shakespeare, seemingly on the assumption that only what is hazy is great, and only

<sup>1</sup>This is not meant, of course, to disparage that sort of textual criticism and revision whose aim is to recover for us as far as possible the exact words of the dramatist. It is only because this has been done so well that we are now able to enter with confidence upon the larger interpretation of the real dramatic import of the plays.

what is mystical or mysterious is profound, and only what is incomprehensible is truly artistic. Because Shakespeare is the greatest of dramatists, it would seem that he is to be understood as not understandable, and must be conceived as inconceivably deep. He is not permitted to think clearly, for this would not show greatness; and he must not state his meanings pointedly, for this would not be artistic. No interpretation can be allowed which is obvious, and especially none that would have any meaning for Elizabethans. These apparent friends of Shakespeare would make the interpretation of the dramas as mystical as the Baconians would make the authorship.

## IV

Holding, then, that Shakespeare's plays must be studied as Elizabethan dramas, I have tried to approach them in the historical spirit, and have tried to understand them as they are, without assuming them to be unintelligible, and without devising plans for their improvement. Few of the vexatious questions of Shakespearean scholarship have any direct bearing on problems of narrative, on which alone interpretation depends. The approximately correct text with which scholars have at last furnished us is a valuable aid to true interpretation, but not invaluable. The discovery of the sources for so many of the plays is always very interesting, and in many cases suggestive, for frequently the most significant turns of narrative are found to be of Shakespeare's own invention. The historical investigations that have been carried on have also enabled us in some measure to see the plays as did the audiences for whom they were written, and this has

given us our method of approach. But the plays themselves as finished works of art, perfect and entire, are after all the only works that come to us directly from the master's hand. And the secrets of Shakespeare are for him that neither taketh from nor addeth to his words.



**HAMLET:**

AN IDEAL PRINCE



## CHAPTER II

### HAMLET:

#### AN IDEAL PRINCE

##### I

##### *Interpretation of the Play.*

After three centuries of acting and more than a century of critical study we are still wondering what Shakespeare meant by his play of *Hamlet*. More has been written about the play and the character than about any historical person, with a single exception, and yet no satisfactory explanation has been reached, and we are still trying to solve the riddle of the drama. The acknowledged difficulties in all the theories have led some critics to the conclusion that the trouble is with the play itself, and that no theory can hope to reach a complete and satisfactory explanation. Professor Lewis has recently said that "The difficulties that confront any theory about Hamlet induce at last a belief that no single theory is admissible—that neither the play nor the character is a consistent whole."<sup>1</sup>

The usual interpretations of *Hamlet* make it a very curious and mysterious but not a great play, and the Prince a very interesting psychological phenomenon but not a great character. Critics have said that it is an inconsistent and rambling play, and the Prince a

<sup>1</sup> *The Genesis of Hamlet*, by Charlton M. Lewis, p. 20. New York, Henry Holt & Co., 1907.

weak and irresolute character. The intelligence of the world, however, has not been content to regard either the play or the character as an enigma or as a commonplace. The persistent conviction of the play-going public, which in the case of *Hamlet* means the intelligent and scholarly public, is that it is a great play and a noble character, the greatest play and the greatest character in all dramatic literature. No theory can satisfy the public, therefore, which does not see in the play something majestic and in the character something noble and grand.

Whatever may be our present difficulties with the play or the character, there is no evidence that either presented any great problems to the play-goers in the days of Elizabeth. There is abundant evidence that *Hamlet* was one of the most popular of Shakespeare's plays in the dramatist's own day, as in ours, and it is fair to assume that it was not a puzzle to them, but presented some rather definite meaning about which there was general agreement. It is altogether unlikely that it could attract so much attention in such a practical age if the play was to them the riddle it has become to us. The men of the adventurous and stirring times of Elizabeth were not much given to speculation, after the supposed manner of *Hamlet*, but were interested chiefly in the practical affairs of the individual and of the nation. The literature that was popular in those days had to do mostly with the exciting events of the time in church or state, and the great popularity of *Hamlet* suggests that the play may have had some such significance. Great works of literature generally have a deep meaning for the age for which they are produced, and seldom fail entirely of comprehension. They become mysterious only to after generations,

when the local and temporal conditions have changed, or when some phase of their content has been overlooked. The clue must then be found in a reconsideration of the work and of the conditions of its original production.

### *Theories of Hamlet.*

It has become apparent to most students of *Hamlet* that no existing theory of the play is entirely satisfactory. The usual interpretations all alike fail to account for the unequalled interest always shown by the public in both play and character. The two outstanding theories doubtless contain much that is valuable, though they have also much that is valueless. The Goethe-Coleridge theory, especially, has done injustice to the character of Hamlet, and has even become a great obstacle to a proper interpretation of the play. As Professor Corson says: "I am disposed to think that Coleridge and Goethe, by the substantially similar theories they advanced, in regard to the man, Hamlet, contributed more, especially Goethe (as he exercised a wider authority than Coleridge), toward shutting off a sound criticism of the play, than any other critics or any other cause."<sup>1</sup>

The Goethe-Coleridge theory is the chief source of the notion that Hamlet is a victim of procrastination. These two great critics have made much of Hamlet's delay in carrying out the injunctions of the ghost, and have attributed it to a certain irresoluteness of character. They have said that the difficulties were all internal, and claim that Hamlet is too deficient of will or too overbalanced of mind to carry any plans into

<sup>1</sup> *Introduction to Shakespeare*, by Hiram Corson, p. 213. Boston, D. C. Heath & Co.

execution.

Ulrici was probably the first to repudiate such inherent deficiencies in the character of the Prince.<sup>1</sup> Present-day readers are ready to endorse Ulrici, and to assert that on the contrary Hamlet is "a powerfully and healthily endowed nature, with the most brilliant gifts of mind and heart."<sup>2</sup> Professor Bradley says he is "a heroic, terrible figure. He would have been formidable to Othello or Macbeth."<sup>3</sup> Professor Lewis tells us that "In Kyd's play Hamlet was not guilty of procrastination," and he says he "cannot believe Hamlet is to blame for any irresoluteness." It is also true, as he further says, that "audiences do not condemn Hamlet as a weakling; they are with him all the time."<sup>4</sup>

The attempts to make it appear that Hamlet is incapable, that he is guilty of indecision and procrastination, have not satisfied the public any better than the critics. In the early part of the play he seems to them exceedingly forceful and capable of almost anything. The play impresses audiences with the idea that he is laboring under some sort of restraint. Hamlet does not have to urge himself forward, but to hold himself back. His words after his first interview with the players, that have been taken as an excuse for his inability to act, are rather a bitter self-reproach for not acting without further evidence of the king's guilt, an upbraiding of himself for permitting himself to be restrained. In the next moment, however, he sees the folly of this, and satisfies himself that it is much better

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Furness, *Variorum Hamlet*, Vol. II, pp. 292-3.

<sup>2</sup> Oechelhäuser, English trans. in Furness, II., p. 341.

<sup>3</sup> *Shakespearean Tragedy*, pp. 102-3. London, 2nd edition, 1905.

<sup>4</sup> *The Genesis of Hamlet*, pp. 88, 92, 96.

to wait for further evidence. The spirit he has seen may be the devil, but the play will reveal beyond doubt the king's guilt or innocence. It is the part of wisdom, then, to wait for the evidence.

These elements of the situation have been much better understood by the Klein-Werder theory. This theory definitely repudiates the view of Hamlet's character that regards him as incapable, and as a weakling. It views the difficulties of the prince as external rather than internal, and explains the delay as necessary in order to procure adequate corroboration of the revelations of the ghost. Hamlet has had suspicions which are verified only by the ghost, though by nothing that would convince any one but himself, and not sufficient to warrant even him in taking the life of his uncle. The ghost, too, had told him not to harm his mother, and this very greatly hampers him in the execution of his task. To strike the king without at the same time striking the queen requires the highest wisdom and the most dexterous skill.

Werder does not regard Hamlet's task as the mere killing of the king, but the execution of justice upon the king. He says, "His task is justly to punish the murderer of his father . . . and to satisfy the Danes of the righteousness of his action."<sup>1</sup> Hamlet is called upon to "revenge" his father, not merely to kill the murderer of his father. The process of vengeance is very different from the act of slaying. To kill the king at any time he chanced to meet him might be comparatively easy, but it would be only "hire and salary, not revenge" (III. iii. 79), and would only complicate and not fulfil his true mission. Hamlet's task is

<sup>1</sup> *The Heart of Hamlet's Mystery*, English trans. by Wilder, p. 54. New York, 1907.

more than to take the life of the king. He must bring him to justice and if possible to confession, that he may himself appear justified before the people, and before his own conscience.

This theory, then, gives a better explanation of Hamlet's conception of his duty than any other, and fails only because it comes short of the full explanation. Werder does not seem to understand the larger social and political aims of Hamlet, and therefore cannot assign a motive sufficient to account for his course throughout the play. On the Werder theory, the play must be called a tragedy of failure, for Hamlet never did succeed in publicly convicting the king of his crime and of justifying his execution. The theory has made a notable advance upon the Goethe-Coleridge theory, but cannot be said to have plucked out the heart of Hamlet's mystery. Both of these classic theories fail, as all others fail, because they persistently ignore certain parts of the play as written by Shakespeare. Some of these elements are in the original sources of the drama, and some of them have been added by Shakespeare himself. It is these overlooked features of his play that distinguish Shakespeare from all other dramatists, and raise his play above the many others of personal revenge, and place it in a class entirely by itself. And it is these parts that alone can furnish the key to the entire mystery.

### *The Mystery of Life.*

With the failure of all theories to explain *Hamlet*, some recent critics are disposed to give up the pursuit and are trying to content themselves with the thought that perhaps after all the dramatist was only endeavoring to present the mystery of life and to por-

tray only its deep inscrutability. Professor Dowden has said that *Hamlet* is not an enigma or a puzzle, but "a mystery." He says, "Shakspere created it a mystery, and therefore it is forever suggestive; forever suggestive and never wholly explicable."<sup>1</sup>

In reference to *King Lear* the same writer expounds his conception of Shakespeare's art in these words: "If life proposes inexplicable riddles, Shakspere's art must propose them also."<sup>2</sup> If life is a mystery, such critics would say, we must be content to let Shakespeare present it as such. We do not understand our own life, these critics imply, and we need not wonder that we cannot understand Hamlet's problem. To us as to *Hamlet*, the mystery is complete, and both problem and solution are hidden from us, the one as inscrutable as the other.

This kind of criticism, however, returns upon itself. We are much worse off if it is life rather than the play that is the great mystery. The desire to solve the riddle of the play is only that it may throw some light upon the problem of existence. But if the purpose of the play is only to confirm the mystery of life, then the darkness is only deepened, and the confusion is worse confounded. This view would forget that Shakespeare was a man writing for men, about problems of human existence, and not a Creator endowing his work with life. All human thought about life, whether in art or literature or philosophy is an attempt to understand man and his life, not to draw a veil of mystery over it and declare it inscrutable. It would be an entirely false view of art that would regard it as its business to

<sup>1</sup> *Shakspere—His Mind and Art*, by Edward Dowden, 13th ed., London, 1906, p. 126.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 258.

declare its subject-matter mysterious. A drama that would attempt to portray only the mystery of life would really mean nothing, and would have no reason for its existence. A criticism that sees nothing in *Hamlet* but the inscrutability of life thereby admits its own failure and its own inscrutability. An interpretation that neither explains the play nor the life that the play attempts to depict has little right to exist. Life may be a mystery, but human thought and art stubbornly refuse to admit it, and their very stubbornness constitutes their right to speak to us. *Hamlet* may be to us a mystery, but it is only because we have failed to understand it, and not because it is inscrutable. In a play so universally lauded we suspect there is embodied a view of life that it will be worth our while to understand. And the fact that criticism has not yet solved the mystery only serves to invite us to renewed efforts to interpret its view of life.

### *The Play and the Sources.*

The chief material for the interpretation of a Shakespearean play is always the dramatist's own words, so far as textual criticism can furnish them. In the case of *Hamlet*, as of the other plays, we doubtless have inherited a fairly correct copy of the acting version, and the slight discrepancies and inconsistencies within the text itself are likely of quite minor importance, and do not affect the general meaning of the play.<sup>1</sup> With the text before us, then, there seems no good reason why we cannot understand the play, and get from it the meaning the dramatist intended. If we hit upon the right method of interpretation, a careful study of the text, the whole text, and nothing but the

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Tolman. *Views About Hamlet*, pp. 33 ff. Boston, 1906.

text, should disclose to us the heart of *Hamlet*'s mystery.

There are many other things, however, that might help us in understanding the play. Great assistance might come from a knowledge of the production of the play under the direct supervision of the dramatist himself, but the records are too meagre to be of any real value. Researches into the literature and history of Elizabethan England have added much to our knowledge of the period, and have enabled us to see the play in connection with the general and theatrical conditions of the times, but these have not unravelled the secret of the play for us. The comparisons of the play with other plays of the type, the revenge plays, have not brought us much nearer to the heart of *Hamlet*. Shakespeare always seems to write above the level of thought and passion of all other dramatists. And the search for the "sources" of Shakespeare's plays in the works of earlier dramatists and authors has so far yielded nothing of very great value. What we may lack through the loss of Kyd's *Hamlet* it is impossible to say, but the meagre results of the comparisons of other plays with their known sources leads inevitably to the conviction that Kyd's play could not furnish the key to Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. Shakespeare seems to make quite independent use of all the material he finds in earlier stories or plays. These, however, may give us a point of view for the story and serve as a valuable introduction to the dramatist's own work.

Though we cannot unravel the mystery of *Hamlet* by studies outside the play itself, it is nevertheless true that sometimes very valuable hints or suggestions can be found in the sources from which plays have been

made. Shakespeare does not often change the inner character of a story, but rather deepens and broadens its meaning, and gives it a larger significance. Sometimes, as in the case of *The Merchant of Venice*, he brushes aside the more recent renderings of a story, and goes back and gives a new interpretation of its original meaning. He sees a truth hidden in an old story that has not been fully developed, and he puts it through the crucible of his own imagination, and brings out its hidden wealth. This, apparently, is what he has done in the case of *Hamlet*. The original story, however, is to him only a hint, and the more vital parts of the drama are his own contribution.

Of the probable sources of the story of *Hamlet*, only two are accessible, the original story as told in the *Historia Danica* of Saxo Grammaticus and the *Hystorie of Hamblet*, by Francis de Belleforest. Kyd's play of *Hamlet* has been lost, and the German play, *Fraticide Punished*, very probably has either a common source with *Hamlet* or is a later version of the story. We must look for the "sources" of Shakespeare's play, then, only to the *Historia* of Saxo, and the *Hystorie* of Belleforest. It is quite remarkable that Saxo, Belleforest, and Shakespeare contain features not to be found in the German play, and these will be seen to be of great value in our interpretation.

Even in Saxo the revenge of the murder of his father is much more than an individual and personal matter with Hamlet. The killing of the king not only accomplishes an act of individual justice, but is at the same time a deliverance of the country from the rule of a king who is both a murderer and a corrupting influence in the life and politics of Denmark. Claudius, or Fengo as he is called in Saxo, is an evil influence in the

country, and his rule is in very great contrast with that of the elder Hamlet who preceded and with that of the younger Hamlet who follows him, for in Saxo the prince lives to become the next king. As Latham says, "The Hamlet of the fourth book is no weakling in any sense of the word, neither is he either fool or idiot, natural or pretending. On the contrary, he is a warrior of the true Norse type, and a politician and strategist of unrivalled cunning."<sup>1</sup> He seems, indeed, to be the type of the National Hero, and was in character and conduct a sort of Danish Prince Arthur.

In *Belleforest*, however, this conception is still more clearly in the mind of the writer. Here Hamlet definitely poses as the deliverer of the people in his revenge upon the king. After he has killed the king he addresses the people, speaking of himself as "the author of your deliverance," and telling them "they should be thankfull for such and so great a benefit as the destruction of a tyrant, and the overthrow of the place that was the storehouse of his villainies, and the true receptacle of all the theeves and traytors in this kingdome." He proceeds to tell them that in killing the king he had two motives; first, "vengeance for the violence done unto my lord and father," and, secondly, "for the subjection and servitude that I perceived in this country." He then explains to them that he did the deed himself out of a desire to spare the people. "But it liked me best to do it myself alone, thinking it a good thing to punish the wicked without hazarding the lives of my friends and loyall subjects, not desiring to burthen other mens shoulders with this weight; for that I made account to effect it well inough without exposing

<sup>1</sup> *Two Dissertations on the Hamlet of Saxo Grammaticus and of Shakespeare*, by R. G. Latham, p. 49, London, 1872.

any man into danger, and by publishing the same should clean have overthrown the device, which at this present I have so happily brought to passe.”<sup>1</sup> Then, after further reviewing the career and character of his murderous uncle, he says, “It is I that have taken away the infamy of my contry, and extinguished the fire that imbraced your fortunes. . . . I was grieved at the injurie committed both to my father and my native country. . . . I am the author of your preseration.”<sup>2</sup>

It appears, then, that in these two earliest known forms of the old Danish legend, Hamlet is portrayed as a national hero, and the deliverer of his country from the corruption and servitude of the wicked king, his uncle, and that he accomplished this end by his own valor and without hazarding the lives of the people of Denmark. No wonder, then, as the story proceeds to tell, he “wan the affections of the nobility, that some wept for pity, other for joy, to see the wisdome and gallant spirit of Hamlet.”<sup>3</sup> These noble deeds make Hamlet a real national hero, and it is this spirit Shakespeare has apparently incorporated into his play, and that up to this time has not been appreciated by critics and readers.

### *The Play and the Prince.*

With this conception of the story, it becomes important to study very closely the situation as developed in the early scenes of *Hamlet*.<sup>4</sup> The dramatic exposition will prove to give us the right point of view

<sup>1</sup> *The Hystorie of Hamblet*, English version of 1608, reprinted in Furness’s *Variorum Hamlet*, II., p. 111.

<sup>2</sup> *Op. cit.*, II., pp. 112-3.

<sup>3</sup> *Op. cit.*, II., p. 113.

<sup>4</sup> *Cf.* Note A, pp. 291-3, *infra*.

for a proper understanding of the play. A good deal of the trouble comes from the fact that the play has not been approached in the right manner. With few exceptions the existing interpretations of the play attempt to understand the drama by first trying to understand the character. The critics seem to forget that the play is not the history of a certain Prince of Denmark, but a work of imagination, based as we see upon legends, but constructed or reconstructed according to the dramatist's views of human life. *Hamlet*, like all other dramas, is "an arranged spectacle" in which there are many persons, but one chief person. The Prince, Hamlet, cannot be said to be the play, though he is the one person upon whom the action of the play turns. We should try, then, first, to understand the drama; and then we may hope to understand the man Hamlet. The Prince is not the play, though he is the chief character of the play.

If Shakespeare in this play has adhered to his usual practice in striking the key-note in the first scene,<sup>1</sup> then we must believe that the initial situation of the play has developed before the Prince makes his appearance. Hamlet comes upon the stage for the first time in the second scene, after many of the dramatic elements have already been introduced into the situation. The condition of affairs in Denmark, the relation of Denmark to Norway, and the ambitions of young Prince Fortinbras, are all carefully outlined by the dramatist before Hamlet comes upon the stage. Furthermore, the ghost appears to others on three several nights before it appears to him, and he receives his commission only in the fourth scene. The dramatic

<sup>1</sup> Cf. "Shakespeare's Opening Scenes as Striking the Key-note of Dramatic Action and Motive," by C. W. Hodell, in *Poet Lore*, Vol. VI., 1894, pp. 169, 337, and 452.

situation is therefore developed in large part before he appears, and his interview with the ghost seems only the completing factor. It would seem, then, that Hamlet is not the play in himself, but only a factor in the solution of the problem, though a factor so large that he soon dominates everything and becomes the dramatic hero.

## II

*Hamlet's Silence.*

A great many students of the play have expressed surprise that nowhere does Hamlet give distinct utterance to his conception of the nature of the task assigned him by the ghost. He nowhere explains clearly his own motives, not even in his private talks with his friend, Horatio, nor yet in his soliloquies. This may be due in part to the fact that Hamlet is not the play. As we have seen, the problem of the play cannot be solved by reference only to the prince. The situation of the play is developed before he comes on the stage, and as we shall see later the full solution is reached only after his death. Moreover, the character of his troubles and his task of revenge are of such a personal nature that he cannot reveal them even to Horatio. The fact that his troubles are only suspicions, that cannot be verified at present, forbids a declaration even to his bosom friend.

Hamlet very properly has the habit of silence. There is about him, as has been said "an habitual secrecy" that resists all our prying inquisitiveness. He scarcely deigns even to mention his suspicions to himself, and his soliloquies do not disclose fully his inner thoughts.

In his first soliloquy, which occurs in his first appearance on the stage, Hamlet denounces his mother's "o'erhasty marriage," as if this were all that troubled him. His great grief almost breaks his heart, yet he concludes by reminding himself that he must not speak out, saying,

“But break my heart, for I must hold my tongue!”  
(I. ii. 159.)

In all his associations with his friends, moreover, he enjoins them to the strictest secrecy regarding any revelations made to them. When Horatio and the others tell Hamlet of the appearance of the ghost, he draws from them all the information he can, and then pledges them to the utmost secrecy, saying, “Give it an understanding, but no tongue.” (I. ii. 249.) After he has himself seen the ghost they ask him, “What news, my lord?” But he denies them, saying, “No; you will reveal it.” He then seems to think of telling them, first pledging them to secrecy, and begins by saying, “There's ne'er a villain dwelling in all Denmark,” and then changing his mind for fear they will disclose it, he adds indifferently, “But he's an arrant knave.” A few moments later, after assuring them, “It is an honest ghost,” he makes them swear solemnly upon the cross of his sword, “Never make known what you have seen to-night.”<sup>1</sup>

Hamlet finds it impossible even to make a confidant of Horatio, for not only is his trouble only a suspicion, but it is of the most intimate personal kind, involving as it does the honor of his mother. Fortunately, the friendship between the two is so genuine and strong that Horatio remains his trusty friend without a knowledge of

<sup>1</sup> I. v. 117-8, 123-4, 136, 143.

all that is in Hamlet's mind and heart. It is clear, however, that Horatio knows much more than the others, and more than Hamlet is reported as telling him. At the end of the play, when he is dying, Hamlet solemnly charges Horatio after his death to

"report me and my cause aright  
To the unsatisfied." (V. ii. 326-7.)

Then after giving his voice for the election of Fortinbras as the next king of Denmark, he dies with these words on his lips, "the rest is silence." (V. ii. 345.)<sup>1</sup>

No words of Hamlet, then, fully disclose his thoughts and his motives, nor is it necessary that they should. All his words are naturally spoken with the closest reference to the entire situation and the conditions about him. These conditions must, therefore, interpret for us his words and his motives, and if properly understood will make his words clear. Shakespeare does not find it necessary to have Hamlet openly and explicitly declare his thoughts. But he does take particular pains to explain very fully the dramatic situation and all the surroundings of Hamlet, and these give the requisite meaning to his words. It is the supreme art of Shakespeare to delineate his characters in the most intimate relation to the situation and movement of his dramas, and never in isolation or apart from the action of his plays. In the case of Hamlet, there are fewer explicit words than usual in his plays, and probably for the reason that he has more carefully elaborated the situation that should give the words and actions the meaning required. It is only in these dramatic surroundings that we can find the clue to the character and motive of Hamlet, and these the critics have not been able to understand.

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Quotation from Edward Gans, in Furness, Vol. II., p. 292.

*The "External Relations of the Persons."*

Largely from the influence and example of Goethe, nearly all criticism of *Hamlet* has overlooked and ignored the dramatist's careful exposition of the situation as given in the first scene of the play. Goethe declared the initial situation of the play to be a useless and inartistic encumbrance to the story, and led the way in disregarding it in the interpretation. This first scene, however, contains the dramatist's own exposition of his play, and outlines for us the environment in which *Hamlet* is to perform his part. The fallacy has unfortunately been passing current among scholars that Shakespeare was very careless in reconstructing the old plays upon which he worked, and they have therefore felt no necessity of paying the strictest attention to all the elements that he works into his dramatic expositions. But it is now high time to cease ignoring whatever he has written, especially what he has himself added to the material that came to his hand. The criticism that attempts to find all of Shakespeare's thought without studying carefully all his words has utterly failed, as was inevitable, and should now be abandoned.

As a consequence of this misconception, no adequate explanation has ever been offered of many elements that the dramatist has with seemingly great care outlined in the first scene of the play. The relations of the two kingdoms of Denmark and Norway, which the play explains very fully, have never been seen to have any significance for the play as a whole. The part of young Fortinbras has in the same manner never been made clear, and he is usually treated as a very unimportant incident. This is surely a great mistake, for almost the entire first scene is given over to these

topics, and they constantly recur to the very end of the play, where finally the crown of Denmark passes to Prince Fortinbras. This fiery young warrior seems always to be hovering over Denmark, like an eagle over its intended prey. He appears directly in the fourth and fifth acts, and is a factor in every act but the third, in which the ghost comes to whet Hamlet's "almost blunted purpose." The dramatist has done everything possible to indicate that great significance attaches to the relations of the two kingdoms, and of the two princes.

Goethe spoke of these circumstances surrounding Hamlet as the "external relations of the persons," and declared that Shakespeare had managed them very badly, and to no dramatic purpose. He made bold to say that "All these circumstances and events would be very fit for expanding and lengthening a novel; but here they injure exceedingly the unity of the piece, particularly as the hero has no plan, and are, in consequence, entirely out of place." He proposes concerning "these external, single, dissipated, and dissipating motives, to cast them all at once away, and substitute a solitary one instead of them." He then elaborates his plan, which is, briefly, to eliminate all reference to Wittenberg and the university and to connect Horatio directly with Norway by making him the son of the viceroy, and "When Hamlet tells Horatio of his uncle's crime, Horatio counsels him to go to Norway in his company, to secure the affections of the army, and return in warlike force."<sup>1</sup> Goethe scarcely even takes the trouble to consider all the references to the relations of Denmark and Norway, but brushes them aside as entirely out of place.

<sup>1</sup> *Wilhelm Meister*. Book V. chapt. IV. Carlyle's translation.

The changes which Goethe proposed to make might conceivably produce an excellent play, for Goethe's genius may have been equal to the task. But the resulting drama would no longer be Shakespeare's, and it would have no more relation to his play than his *Hamlet* has to Kyd's. It might still be called *Hamlet*, but the motive and the character of the prince would be changed and would have no relation to the one we know. The futility of these suggestions upon the part of Goethe serves only to make clear the difficulties critics have experienced in interpreting these "external relations of the persons." It is, therefore, of the highest importance to scrutinize these elements of the play with the utmost care, to see if after all they do not constitute a very significant part of the dramatic situation. If they do, then we may expect them to contain the true motive of the play and offer the key to the solution of its mystery.

It should be observed at the outset that these troublesome "external relations" are Shakespeare's own contribution to the story, for there is no reference to young Fortinbras in any of the extant possible sources of the drama, and no such exposition of the existing relations of the two kingdoms. *The Hystorie of Hamblet* alone refers to Norway, but only to tell how Hamlet's father had overcome the king of Norway before the opening of the story. No hint is given of the present strained relations of the two kingdoms. If Shakespeare had found such relations in the story he adopted, it is conceivable that he might have left them standing in little or no connection with the motive of the play, as he may have done with certain other minor features of the story. But when he added them himself, they must certainly be considered as having a very vital

relation to the meaning of the play. The reference to Norway in the earlier story seems to have furnished him with a hint, and he wove carefully into his play the relations of the two kingdoms.

These new elements of the story Shakespeare utilized from the first, for they appear in the First Quarto substantially as in the First Folio. These deliberate additions to the story furnished an encompassing situation to the play, and supplied the elements that lifted Hamlet's motive from the low level of personal revenge to the high plane of national purpose. This enables Shakespeare to endow his hero with a much loftier and nobler passion, and to connect the action of the play with a more truly dramatic situation. The dramatist had previously done a similar thing in *Romeo and Juliet*, where he made love serve the purpose of reconciling two rival houses, and in *The Merchant of Venice*, where he made the love of Portia and Bassanio the means of frustrating the cruel revenge of Shylock. Shakespeare was never satisfied with being a mere psychologist of human passion, but contented himself only when he could portray also its moral and spiritual meaning.

### *The Dramatic Situation.*

The greetings in the opening lines of the first act seem to indicate an unusual watchfulness and nervousness on the part of the guards, due, as later conversation discloses, to the previous appearances of the ghost, and to the warlike state of the kingdom. Denmark, it seems, is threatened with the revolt of Norway, which had become a tributary kingdom under the late king Hamlet. This old king was a great patriot, it would appear, and now his ghost shows itself among

the guards of the palace, as if to inspire or to take part in the defence of the kingdom. With the change of guards, the conversation turned to "this thing," "this dreaded sight," "this apparition," which they "two nights have seen;" and which as they spoke appeared for the third time, in "warlike form" as before.

Horatio, the wise and faithful friend of Hamlet, regards this as a matter of grave national import, and fears that it "bodes some strange eruption to our state." As his next speech indicates, Horatio is well acquainted with the past history and with the present affairs of the kingdom. Through him the dramatist lays before us the general situation of the play.<sup>1</sup>

Marcellus then asks for an explanation of the warlike preparations he sees going on all around. This inquiry reveals the fact that there are four distinct forms of military and naval activity on the part of the Danes, all of which are quite unusual. He speaks first of the extraordinary watchfulness of the guard, which he calls, "this same strict and most observant watch." This would seem to indicate that they expect war, and fear they may be suddenly attacked. Then he discloses the fact that workmen are kept busy by night as well as by day in rushing preparations: "So nightly toils the subject of the land." Added to this is the active manufacture of cannon and purchase of implements of war from foreign marts, indicating their fear of a sudden attack that may possibly find them unprepared. And finally, he speaks of the feverish haste in building ships, and the fact that they are impressing men into the work, and keeping them busy even on Sundays. When this fact is considered in connection

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Note B, pp. 293-5, *infra*.

with the strict watch, it seems plain that they fear a sudden attack from the sea. Marcellus notices that all these preparations are being pushed with "sweaty haste" and wants to know the reason, saying, "Who is it that can inform me?" (I. i. 70-79.)

In reply to the inquiry of Marcellus, Horatio undertakes to explain, and says that these preparations are intended as a defence against the threatened attack of young Fortinbras of Norway. To make the matter clear, he goes on to explain how the trouble arose between the two countries. It seems that the elder Hamlet was a brave but peaceable man, and that he was "prick'd on by a most emulate pride, dared to the combat," by the elder Fortinbras. The "valiant Hamlet" did not pick the quarrel; but when he was attacked would not permit another to take advantage of him, and boldly stood up for his own. In the ensuing war Fortinbras was slain, and part of his dominion passed under the sovereignty of Denmark.

Now the young Prince of Norway has come into power, and wants to recover "those foresaid lands," and for this purpose is gathering an army and making other warlike preparations. Denmark is therefore compelled to make ready to resist the attack, and the coming in armor of the ghost of the late king is taken at once as having something to do with "his country's fate." The king appears to be ready once more, even in spirit, to combat "the ambitious Norway," and to defend his country. Horatio does not hesitate to connect the coming of the ghostly apparition with this apparent crisis in the affairs of Denmark, and likens it to the portents in Rome before the fall of "the mightiest Julius," and regards this as evidence of the interest of heaven in the forthcoming struggle.

This interpretation of the situation seems to satisfy Marcellus, and may be regarded as the true explanation. It is borne out by Bernardo, too, who connects the coming of the ghost of the former king with the impending war.

### *Hamlet and the Ghost.*

The ghost in *Hamlet* no doubt performs an important dramatic function. Whatever may have been Shakespeare's belief about ghosts, he utilizes the popular conception to render objective what is in the minds of his characters. The ghosts or witches that appeared to Macbeth spoke out only what was in his mind, and revealed his inner thoughts to the audience better than any words of his could do. In the same way, the ghost in *Hamlet* discloses to us the suspicions already in the minds of Hamlet and his friends. When Hamlet sees the ghost and hears its revelations, he voices this thought by saying, "Oh my prophetic soul!" (I. v. 40.) And the fact that it first appears to the friends of Hamlet suggests that they shared his suspicions and perhaps even anticipated them, though no word had been spoken. The inquiry of Marcellus about the cause of the warlike activity and his later remark about the rotten condition of Denmark seem to imply a suspicion that he is endeavoring to verify or to disprove.

The scepticism that all at first show concerning the ghost seems to indicate their unwillingness to put faith in their suspicions. They do not willingly think evil of the king, and they all want some undoubted proof, not only of the fact of the ghost's appearance, but of the truth of his words. Horatio hesitates to take the word of Bernardo and Francisco, and is convinced

only by the actual sight of the ghost. Hamlet, apparently the least suspicious of all, for he is the last to see the ghost, seems reluctant to believe that Horatio and the others have seen it. To convince him, Horatio assures him with an oath of the truth of his report, saying,

"As I do live, my honor'd lord, 'tis true."  
(I. ii. 221.)

His doubts are not finally removed until the fourth scene when he sees the ghost for himself. At last, the evidence overcomes his moral reluctance to believe such foul suspicions, and Hamlet is convinced of the guilt of the king.

#### *The Ghost in Armor.*

So much is said in the play about the ghost's warlike form that great significance must be attached to that fact. On its appearance on the stage Horatio speaks of it as having on,

"that fair and warlike form  
In which the majesty of buried Denmark  
Did sometimes march."  
(I. i. 47-49.)

And when Marcellus asks,

"Is it not like the king?"

Horatio replies :

"As thou art to thyself;  
Such was the very armor he had on  
When he the ambitious Norway combated."  
(I. i. 58-61.)

When Marcellus further observes its "martial stalk," Horatio suggests that,

"This bodes some strange eruption to our state."  
(I. i. 69.)

Then after Horatio has explained to Marcellus and the others the reason for the warlike preparations and the impending danger from Norway, Bernardo remarks:

‘ Well may it sort, that this portentous figure  
Comes armed through our watch, so like the king  
That was and is the question of these wars.’  
(I. i. 109-111.)

It is quite clear, then, that they regard the king's appearance in arms as a portent of grave danger to the state from the ambitions of young Fortinbras of Norway.

When they inform Hamlet of the apparition, one of the points they specially mention is that he was “arm'd.” Horatio describes the ghost as,

“A figure like your father,  
Armed at point exactly, cap-a-pe.”  
(I. ii. 199-200.)

Hamlet seems not more impressed with the appearance of the ghost than with the fact that he was “arm'd.” After being apparently convinced that the ghost had actually appeared, in great excitement he questions his friends until all three assert that the ghost was “arm'd.” Then he cross-questions them, and, when convinced of the truth of their statement, he begs them to keep the matter secret, and

“Give it an understanding, but no tongue.”  
(I. ii. 249.)

When alone, he observes,

“My father's spirit in arms! all is not well;  
I doubt some foul play.”  
(I. ii. 254-5.)

It is the general opinion, then, that great significance is to be attached to the fact that the king appeared in armor. When we take this in connection with the

fact that he appeared to the guards, as they said, "upon the platform where we watch'd," it is impossible not to infer that the king came upon a patriotic mission, and that his appearance was intended to have a relation to the defence of Denmark.

All that Hamlet's friends had told him was soon confirmed by the appearance of the ghost to him in the same guise. As if to confirm the words of his friends, he notices that the "dead corse" of his father is again clad "in complete steel." (I. iv. 52.) The apparition will say nothing, however, in the presence of all, though he makes it clear by beckoning Hamlet that he has something for his ear alone. As the ghost and Hamlet withdraw for their private interview, Marcellus feels that it is upon the business of the state that the ghost appears, and remarks:

"Something is rotten in the state of Denmark." (I. iv. 90.)

To this Horatio replies, "Heaven will direct it." The inference they all appear to draw is that the visit of the late king's spirit is in connection with the impending danger to the state of Denmark. This seems to imply that the task that is falling to Hamlet is not merely a personal matter between him and his father, but a momentous undertaking of great national import.

#### *The Character of the Elder Hamlet.*

Though we see nothing of the elder Hamlet on the stage, except his ghost, it is really he who is the mainspring of all the action of the play. It was the desire to gain his crown that had impelled Claudius to the murder, and it is the filial duty of Hamlet to his father that urges him to his revenge upon the king. This conflict, then, of the murderer and the avenger of the

elder Hamlet constitutes the main plot of the play, and from this grows the entire narrative.

There are many evidences in the play that the elder Hamlet was a very different man from his brother Claudius. Not only was one the innocent victim and the other the cold-blooded fratricide, but the rule of the two kings was as different as possible. Under the elder Hamlet the kingdom of Denmark had been honorable at home and respected abroad. It seems to have been a kingdom which both citizen and alien recognized as strong and good. But under Claudius the good name of Denmark had been lost, and the wholesome fear of her just power had passed away. Corruption and debauchery now stalk through the land, and foreign powers think it weak and debased. On the confession of Claudius himself it appears that young Fortinbras thinks its weakness affords him a good opportunity to make war upon Denmark, and a fitting time to seize the lands that his father had lost to the elder Hamlet. It is for this reason that he is now threatening Denmark, and if we can judge from the condition of the land, he might reasonably look for a complete triumph.

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The change that has come over the country is but an index of and the effect of the difference of the two kings. The younger Hamlet has made most striking contrasts between his father and his uncle. In the interview with his mother, when he tries to dissuade her from continuing her guilty relations with the king, he calls her attention to the portraits of the two, saying:

"Look here, upon this picture, and on this,  
The counterfeit presentment of two brothers.  
See what a grace was seated on this brow;

• • • • •

A combination and a form indeed,  
Where every god did seem to set his seal  
To give the world assurance of a man;  
This was your husband. Look you now, what follows;  
Here is your husband; like a mildew'd ear  
Blasting his wholesome brother."

(III. iv. 53-65.)

The character of the elder Hamlet is further strikingly depicted in Horatio's explanation of the war preparations to Marcellus and the others. It is evident from this speech that he was a most noble king, who ruled solely in the interests of his kingdom, and not in his personal interests. He had no ambitions, and in no way molested any of his neighbors, but kept his land in prosperity and peace. He was not, however, a weak but a very valiant king, "For so this side of our known world esteem'd him" (I. i. 85), as Horatio goes on to say. He made no wars, but did not hesitate to go to war to defend his own. He would not attempt to plunder any other kingdom, nor would he permit any other to plunder him. He was a peaceable king, but not a peace-at-any-price king.

Therefore, when Fortinbras of Norway challenged him to war, he valiantly took up the challenge, and if we are to judge by the brevity of Shakespeare's account of the war, he very speedily overcame and slew Fortinbras. By his victory the lands that were in dispute fell to Denmark, and so long as he lived they remained his without question. Only when he was dead did Norway once more think itself able to challenge Denmark and dare it to the combat. The weakness of Claudius, the young prince Fortinbras thought, afforded him his opportunity.

It is this sort of strength and virtue that makes the elder Hamlet a real national hero. He was not the

type of the aggressive and conquering hero, who made war for the sake of war and conquest. With that kind of hero Shakespeare has no sympathy. He was, however, the dramatist's ideal king, who loved peace, and would never make war, but who would not hesitate to go to war in defence of his right and of his nation. He would not wage an aggressive war, but was valiant enough to defend his kingdom when attacked. This is the only kind of hero Shakespeare recognizes, and for this kind he had the most profound admiration. Few of the critics have appreciated this character of the elder Hamlet, or have seen in the account any significance for the play. Werder alone seems to get a glimpse of it when he speaks of him as the "hero king, Hamlet's father."<sup>1</sup>

In considering the younger Hamlet it is worth while to observe that previous to Shakespeare's version of the story, in both Saxo and Belleforest, the names of father and son were different. The name of the father in both earlier versions was Horvendil, and only the son was Hamlet. But Shakespeare has given the name also to the father, thus making the son the namesake of the father. This fact, taken together with the son's wonderful devotion to the father, make it evident that Shakespeare desired to have them conceived as of similar character. Certain it is that he has left the impression that the son is but a second Hamlet, of the same character, and of the same ~~self-sacrificing~~ yet heroic type. As the father was an ideal king, so is the son an ideal prince, and Fortinbras in the last speech of the play says that if Hamlet had been put on the throne, there is no doubt he would "have prov'd most royally."

<sup>1</sup> *The Heart of Hamlet's Mystery*, p. 68.

## III

*Claudius and the Condition of Denmark.*

The second scene of the play makes it clear that it is the weak and corrupt condition of Denmark under Claudius that affords occasion for the warlike activities of Fortinbras. From the beginning of the play Hamlet has had suspicions, which are gradually confirmed as the plot develops, that Claudius has exerted a very evil influence upon the country. The later development shows that Hamlet has rightly divined the true inwardness of the situation. Claudius himself is fully cognizant of the state of affairs, and from his lips we get the true explanation. He discloses the fact that young Fortinbras has no such wholesome fear and respect for him as he had for the late king, and makes the damaging admission that:

“young Fortinbras,  
Holding a weak supposal of our worth, . . .  
. . . hath not fail'd to pester us with message,  
Importing the surrender of those lands  
Lost by his father.”

(I. ii. 17-24.)

Claudius further remarks that he has written to Norway, uncle of young Fortinbras, imploring him to restrain the fiery temper of his nephew, and now dispatches two courtiers to the same end. Only by weakly supplicating Norway is Claudius able to keep peace with his neighbor and prevent an invasion. This weakness is in great contrast to the days of the elder Hamlet, when the Danish royal power was feared and respected, both at home and abroad.

There is no doubt that Claudius was a thoroughly bad man. If like Hamlet we cannot prove it at the

opening of the play, we need only wait for the later developments and for his villainous attempts on Hamlet's life. Claudius is indeed as much a villain as Macbeth, and with little or nothing of Macbeth's great ability. The ghost speaks of him as one "whose natural gifts were poor to those of mine!" (I. v. 51-52.) And Hamlet, comparing him to his father in his later interview with his mother, calls him:

"A murderer and a villain;  
A slave that is not twentieth part the tithe  
Of your precedent lord; a vice of kings."  
(III. iv. 96-98.)

Yet Claudius, though a villain, was capable of quick and effective action. He was clever enough to leave no traces of his crime when he killed his brother, and he showed dispatch and skill in quickly bringing about the election of himself as the next king before Hamlet could return from the university. This same power of speedy action is his greatest strength, and enables him to make Hamlet's task at once exceedingly difficult and dangerous.

Gradually there is disclosed in the play considerable evidence of a general corruption and weakening of the state under the example and influence of Claudius. Hamlet is conscious of it on his return from the university, and the king readily admits his dissipations. No doubt Hamlet's sad words about the condition of the world in his first soliloquy are spoken more with reference to Denmark:

"Fie on't! O fie! 'tis an unweeded garden  
That grows to seed; things rank and gross in nature  
Possess it merely."

(I. ii. 135-7.)

The king had led the way in dissipation and debauchery, and in his first interview with Hamlet promises elaborate festivities (I. ii. 121-9). In the same scene Hamlet refers to these habits, and satirically tells his friend Horatio: "We'll teach you to drink deep ere you depart" (I. ii. 175). In his next conversation with Horatio, Hamlet again speaks of the king's drinking habits, and says:

"The king doth wake to-night and takes his rouse,  
Keeps wassail, and the swaggering up-spring reels;  
And as he drains his draughts of Rhenish down,  
The kettle-drum and trumpet thus bray out  
The triumph of his pledge."

(I. iv. 8-12.)

When Horatio asks if this is a Danish custom, Hamlet replies that "it is a custom More honor'd in the breach than the observance." At a later time when Hamlet tries to show to his mother the baseness of his uncle he speaks of him as "the bloat king" (III. iv. 182).

To the virtuous mind of Hamlet one of the worst features of this debauchery is that it has destroyed their reputation among nations, and the fair name of Denmark has suffered irreparable loss:

"This heavy-headed revel east and west  
Makes us traduced and tax'd of other nations;  
They clepe us drunkards, and with swinish phrase  
Soil our addition."

(I. iv. 17-20.)

Then he moralizes upon the baneful influence of "some vicious mole of nature" that corrupts the whole being, until such men

"Shall in the general censure take corruption  
From that particular fault."

(I. iv. 35-6.)

The inevitable implication of course is that the whole state of Denmark has been corrupted by the king's bad habits and vicious nature, until

"the dram of eale,  
Doth all the noble substance of a doubt  
To his own scandal."

(I. iv. 36-8.)

This condition of corruption impresses both Hamlet and his friends almost from the outset. When the ghost has vanished after his appearance to Hamlet and others, Marcellus at once recognizes its relation to the country, and says, "Something is rotten in the state of Denmark" (I. iv. 90). It is Hamlet, however, with his deep moral nature, who most fully recognizes the king's corrupting influence upon Denmark. After the ghost has revealed to him the matter and the manner of his murder, Hamlet at once sees that the crime is not a mere matter between him and Claudius, but that it has engendered a bad condition of affairs in the state and that it is imperative upon him to set himself to the task of reparation:

"The time is out of joint;—O cursed spite,  
That ever I was born to set it right!"  
(I. v. 189-190.)

These thoughts are no doubt in Hamlet's mind when Rosencrantz and Guildenstern tell him the only news is "that the world's grown honest." To this he quickly replies that "your news is not true," and goes on to say that "Denmark's a prison," and "one o' the worst," and at any rate "to me it is a prison" (II. ii. 233-246). A little later in his great soliloquy, referring to his grievous troubles and sufferings, he calls them "The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune" (III. i. 58). No doubt he is thinking not only of the foul murder

of his father, but of the times that are out of joint and that he must try to set right.

There has been a feeling from the first that the coming of the ghost has had to do with affairs of state. Horatio, who has just come from Wittenberg when Marcellus and others report to him of seeing the ghost, volunteers the idea that "This bodes some strange eruption to our state" (I. i. 69). Horatio knows nothing of the murder and yet he thinks the ghost has to do with affairs of state. When he sees the ghost, he thinks of three possible reasons for his appearance. He may want something done; or may want to tell where he has hoarded some treasure; or he may be privy to his country's fate. Taken in connection with what he has just said of the impending danger from young Fortinbras, it seems to indicate a feeling that all is not well with Denmark. Hamlet, however, is the only one who fully comprehends the actual truth.

### *Hamlet and His Father.*

Hamlet's scepticism about the ghost vanishes only when he sees it for himself. At first sight he wonders for a moment whether or not it is some evil spirit sent to do harm. But these doubts soon vanish as he sees the semblance of his father before him. When he first heard of its appearance from his friends, he had resolved to speak to it at any hazard if it looked like his father:

"If it assume my noble father's person,  
I'll speak to it, though hell itself should gape  
And bid me hold my peace."

(I. ii. 243-5.)

This pictures Hamlet as a most dutiful and devoted son, with a perfect faith in his father, and a willing-

ness to undertake anything in his behalf.

As soon, therefore, as he has dispelled his first fears at the sight of the ghost, he addresses himself to him, calling him, "Hamlet, King, father," and begs him to tell him why he leaves his tomb and revisits "the glimpses of the moon" (I. iv. 53). He implores him, "Say, why is this? wherefore? what should we do?" (57). He apparently expects some task to be assigned him, and is ready to listen and obey. He says he does not set his life at a pin's fee, and intimates his resolve at any cost to follow it. He feels that when the ghost beckons him it is fate crying out, and he feels strong for any task:

"My fate cries out,  
And makes each petty artery in this body  
As hardy as the Nemean lion's nerve."

When his friends try to restrain him from following the ghost, he breaks loose and says:

"Unhand me, gentlemen;  
By heaven, I'll make a ghost of him that lets me;  
I say, away!—Go on; I'll follow thee."

(I. iv. 81-6.)

In the private interview with the ghost that follows, Hamlet hears the story of his father's "foul and most unnatural murder," confirming all his worst suspicions. His devotion to his father is shown in his eager attention to the sordid story of his uncle's villainy and his mother's weakness, and in the declaration of his willingness to give himself up to the duty of revenge. He is impatient of the slow rehearsal of the murder, and cries out:

"Haste me to know't, that I, with wings as swift  
As meditation or the thoughts of love,  
May sweep to my revenge."

(I. v. 29-31.)

When he has heard the whole story, he promises the ghost that he will give up every other ambition to accomplish this filial duty, and bursts out into a frantic passion of devotion and vengeance, saying:

"from the table of my memory  
I'll wipe away all trivial fond records, . . .  
And thy commandment all alone shall live  
Within the book and volume of my brain,  
Unmix'd with baser matter; yes, by heaven!"  
(I. v. 98-104.)

Hamlet's first thought is that it is his mother who is primarily responsible for the crime, and he cries out, "O most pernicious woman!" But this thought his father's ghost does not encourage, and has already told him not to contrive against his mother.

The injunction of the ghost to revenge his murder was subject to two restraints. The ghost first enjoined him, "Taint not thy mind." This Hamlet apparently understood as meaning that in revenging his father's murder he was to regard his task as moral, and was to keep his own moral nature uncontaminated. His mission was to restore moral order in Denmark, and not to make matters worse by committing crimes himself. Then the ghost said further, "Nor let thy soul contrive against thy mother aught." Hamlet had been too ready to charge the crime to his mother's influence, and now the ghost admonishes him that he is to strike Claudius down without striking his mother. He is charged to work vengeance on the king without harming the queen. He is to be an avenger of his father, and not a destroyer of his mother. This restraint not to harm his mother greatly complicated his task, for the king and queen were so bound together that it was all but impossible to separate their fates.

These restraints laid upon Hamlet in the accomplishment of his great task were in fact but the restraints which his own moral nature and his great reverence for his father's character would impose upon him. His great devotion to his father, as Werder suggests, was probably due in part to the fact that he turned to him when he found his mother so ignoble. This love for his father and his own moral convictions now found expression in the words of the ghost. He was determined then to preserve his own honor and to spare his mother, leaving her to heaven and to her own conscience. His task, therefore, was extremely difficult in itself, and was made still more arduous by the highly complicated circumstances of the case. These restraints, however, Hamlet freely imposed upon himself, for he could not bring himself to sacrifice his own moral nature or to do violence to his mother even in so great a cause as the avenging of his father's murder. In Hamlet, then, the dramatist has portrayed not only a most intellectual but also a most moral character.

#### *Hamlet's Task of Revenge.*

The task of Hamlet, then, can only be appreciated when considered in reference to all the attendant circumstances. The situation that the dramatist has so carefully developed is most portentous, and the moral restraints that Hamlet has imposed upon himself very greatly circumscribe him in the accomplishment of his task. The disordered internal conditions of the kingdom must be seen as the occasion if not the cause of the incipient revolt of the young Prince of Norway, and the threatened invasion of Denmark. As the son of the late king, and as a possible future king him-

self, Hamlet must look upon these conditions and this impending invasion with great alarm. His dearest friend, Horatio, thoroughly understands the threatening danger, and it must be assumed that Hamlet knows it equally well. The circumstances are so complicated and the conditions so disheartening that no wonder Hamlet curses the fate that assigns him the task of setting it right (I. v. 189-190).

*Next*  
It is into this troubled state that Shakespeare ushers this young and noble-minded Prince of Denmark. Critics have seen little or no significance in this condition of affairs, and have not appreciated the magnitude of Hamlet's task. They fail to understand his motive because they have overlooked the dramatic situation. Yet it is these conditions that furnish the element in his motive that has baffled inquiry, and that explains the whole course of his conduct throughout the play. To understand these fully will furnish the necessary setting for his great burden of sorrow over the untimely death of his father and the "o'erhasty marriage" of his mother.

All these attendant circumstances and the suspicion of foul play in the death of his father have induced in Hamlet a condition of sadness that is noticed by everybody about the court. The king, not knowing Hamlet's suspicions, and the queen, not being a party to the crime, endeavor to arouse him from his melancholy by reminding him that his father's death was not exceptional, for death is common, and "all that lives must die, Passing through nature to eternity." To this Hamlet replies, "Ay, madam, it is common." He spurns the suggestion to put off his mourning robes, and intimates that something still more grievous than the death of his father is preying upon his mind:

“But I have that within which passeth show;  
These, but the trappings and the suits of woe.”  
(I. ii. 85-6.)

When the king and queen have gone out, leaving him to his sorrow, his first soliloquy reveals his great burden of spirit. ~~He feels the load of grief so great that he would almost rather die than live. He would like to~~ relieve his heart by telling his suspicions to some one, but they are as yet only suspicions, and he must hold his tongue.

All of Hamlet's suspicions are confirmed in the private interview with the ghost, in the course of which ~~he is called upon to~~ “Revenge his foul and most unnatural murder.” The story given out that his father was killed by the sting of a serpent the ghost first characterizes as false. Then he proceeds to reveal the truth that,

“The serpent that did sting thy father's life  
Now wears the crown.”  
(I. v. 39-40.)

At once Hamlet bursts out with “O my prophetic soul,” revealing for the first time in the play that he has suspected the real truth. Then follows the true story of the crime. As the king was sleeping in his orchard (garden) he was poisoned by his brother, Claudius, who at once became possessed of his crown, and, in less than two months, of his queen:

“Thus was I, sleeping, by a brother's hand  
~~Of life, of crown, of queen, at once dispatch'd.”~~  
(I. v. 74-5.)

This revelation and injunction assign to Hamlet his task. In a word, he is to revenge his father's murder, committed by his uncle who now wears the crown of

Denmark. Up to this point, there is little difference between *Hamlet* and contemporary revenge plays of which Professor Thorndike has made such an exhaustive and excellent study.<sup>1</sup> Even the earlier stories of Hamlet have but little of the more tragic character that Shakespeare has put into his play. Neither murder nor revenge are in themselves true tragic material. It is only when great human and moral issues are involved in them that they become tragic. These Shakespeare reads into the stories he borrows, or he cannot use them at all. Sometimes he finds hints of this character in his stories, and his genius gives them the tragic expression. To most readers "The Hamlet of Belleforest was a crude, coarse, revengeful, unmeditative, and blood-thirsty murderer."<sup>2</sup> But Shakespeare grasped the tragic possibilities of the story, which other dramatists had missed, and which many critics have overlooked.

Shakespeare's *Hamlet* is a play of a different sort from the old revenge plays. He has raised his play above the low level of blood vengeance by the complications he has introduced into the problem, and by the larger and more patriotic intentions depicted in his hero. With Hamlet it is not a matter of private vengeance for personal wrong, but of public revenge for a national treason. Hamlet has constantly in mind the national rather than the personal bearings of his task, and is always solicitous that his act when committed shall be seen to be an act for the public good. When dying he still keeps this thought in mind, and begs Horatio to "report me and my cause/ aright To the

<sup>1</sup> "The Relations of *Hamlet* to Contemporary Revenge Plays," by A. H. Thorndike, *Publications of the Modern Language Association of America*, 1902, pp. 125-220; New Series, Vol. X., No. 2.

<sup>2</sup> Frank, *The Tragedy of Hamlet*, p. 132. Boston, 1910.

unsatisfied." (V. ii. 326-7.) He suggests that he will bear "a wounded name" unless Horatio shall be at pains to tell his story.

The Werder theory is no doubt correct in maintaining that Hamlet not only wishes to be able to justify himself to his own conscience, but likewise before the people at large. He must so carry out his revenge that he will appear not as a vulgar regicide, but as a moral and patriotic avenger. He wishes, Werder says, to convince the people before the deed, and have the king brought to public confession and justice. Shakespeare had just shown in *Julius Cæsar*, written shortly before *Hamlet*, that a deed of killing even for public reasons cannot well be justified after it is committed. Better far to justify such an act and show its moral necessity before it is undertaken.

Hamlet must, therefore, act not rashly or vindictively, but with due deliberation, and with the larger interests always in mind. To "revenge" the death of his father, in the complicated conditions of Shakespeare's play, is not the simple matter the older theories of *Hamlet* seemed to think. It is a sufficiently difficult and delicate task to execute vengeance upon a king in any case, but as Shakespeare has conceived his plot, it will require all the wisdom of his young scholar from the university. It will be necessary, moreover, to proceed with very great caution and absolute secrecy for a time. He therefore keeps the matter of the ghost's revelations strictly to himself and binds his friends who had seen the ghost to "never make known what you have seen to-night." (I. v. 143.) He must quietly gather whatever further evidence is available, and he must have time to mature and perfect his plan of revenge. He must at the same time dispossess his uncle's mind of

all suspicion, if possible, and for this end he resolves "to put an antic disposition on."

The easiest way for Hamlet to get revenge on Claudius would be to stir up a civil war, as Laertes afterward attempted, and with his popularity it would certainly be successful. This, however, would be at the bloody cost of many of his innocent countrymen, and would at the same time invite the threatened attack from Fortinbras. Both of these eventualities he strives to avoid. Like the Hamlet of Belleforest, he will not involve his countrymen in his undertaking. He wants to strike the king without striking his native land. His task, therefore, is enormous, and it must be executed single-handed. He must strike the king, and at the same time prevent civil war, and a condition that would lay the country open to foreign attack. He must, therefore, be very cautious, and when he acts must appear like the ghost in armor—a defender and not a destroyer of his country.

*Hamlet does not like the task of revenge, and frankly says so. But as a dutiful son and patriotic prince he is willing to go through with it even at the cost of his own life.* It is no easy matter to attack one who is surrounded with all the power and prerogatives of royalty. Claudius flatters himself that he is safe, hedged in as he says by divinity and surrounded by so many hirelings. The task is therefore a gigantic undertaking for a young and inexperienced prince, and, as Shakespeare has pictured it, worthy of the noblest and most intellectual character in his entire drama.

#### *Hamlet's "Antic Disposition."*

There is much evidence in the play that Hamlet deliberately feigned fits of madness in order to confuse

and disconcert the king and his attendants. His avowed intention to act "strange or odd" and to "put an antic disposition on"<sup>1</sup> (I. v. 170, 172) is not the only indication. The latter phrase, which is of doubtful interpretation, should be taken in its context and in connection with his other remarks that bear on the same question. To his old friend, Guildenstern, he intimates that "his uncle-father and aunt-mother are deceived," and that he is only "mad north-north-west." (II. ii. 360.) But the intimation seems to mean nothing to the dull ears of his old school-fellow. His only comment is given later when he advises that Hamlet's is "a crafty madness." (III. i. 8.)

When completing with Horatio the arrangements for the play, and just before the entrance of the court party, Hamlet says, "I must be idle." (III. ii. 85.) This evidently is a declaration of his intention to be "foolish," as Schmidt has explained the word.<sup>2</sup> Then to his mother in the Closet Scene, he distinctly refers to the belief held by some about the court that he is mad, and assures her that he is intentionally acting the part of madness in order to attain his object:

"I essentially am not in madness,  
But mad in craft." ✓  
(III. iv. 187-8.)

This pretense of madness Shakespeare borrowed from the earlier versions of the story. The fact that he has made it appear like real madness to many critics to-day only goes to show the wideness of his knowledge and the greatness of his dramatic skill.

<sup>1</sup> Cf. *Romeo and Juliet* (I. v. 54), where "antic face" means a mask, and also *Richard II* (III. ii. 162) and *Henry VI* (IV. vii. 18).

<sup>2</sup> Cf. *Shakespeare-Lexicon*, by Alexander Schmidt, 3rd edition, Berlin, 1902.

In the play the only persons who regard Hamlet as really mad are the king and his henchmen, and even these are troubled with many doubts. Polonius is the first to declare him mad, and he thinks it is because Ophelia has repelled his love. He therefore reports to the king that "Your noble son is mad" (II. ii. 92), and records the various stages leading to his so-called madness (II. ii. 145-150). No sooner, however, has he reached this conviction than Hamlet's clever toying with the old gentleman leads him to admit that "Though this be madness, yet there is method in't." (II. ii. 203-4.)

Though it suits the king's purpose to accept this pronouncement of Polonius, he is never quite convinced of its truth. His instructions to his henchmen, "Get from him why he puts on this confusion" (III. i. 2), imply that he understands it as pretence and not real lunacy. He soon admits that Hamlet's actions and words do not indicate madness but melancholy:

"What he spake, though it lack'd form a little,  
Was not like madness."

(III. i. 163-4.)

But it serves his wicked purpose to declare him a madman, and to make this the excuse for getting rid of him by sending him to England. In this as in everything the king is insincere, and seeks not the truth but his own personal ends.

Ophelia's view that Hamlet has gone mad for love of her is of no value on the point. She is herself, rather than Hamlet, "Like sweet bells jangled out of tune, and harsh." (III. i. 158.) The poor distracted girl is no judge of lunacy, and knows little of real sanity. She cannot enter into the depth of his mind, and cannot

understand that it is her own conduct that is strange and incoherent.

There need be no doubt, then, that Hamlet's madness was really feigned. He saw much to be gained by it, and to this end he did many things that the persons of the drama must construe as madness. His avowed intention was to throw them off the track. To understand the madness as real is to make of the play a mad-house tragedy that could have no meaning for the very sane Englishmen for whom Shakespeare wrote. There is dramatic value in such madness as Lear's, for the play traces the causes of his madness, and the influences that restore him. Lear's madness had its roots in his moral and spiritual defects, and the cure was his moral regeneration. But no such dramatic value can be assigned to Hamlet's madness. Shakespeare never makes of his dramas mere exhibitions of human experience, wise or otherwise, but they are all studies in the spiritual life of man. His dramas are always elaborate attempts to get a meaning out of life, not attempts to show either its mystery, or its inconsequence, or its madness. If Hamlet were thought of as truly mad, then his entrances and his exits could convey no meaning to sane persons, except the lesson to avoid insanity. But it needs no drama to teach that.<sup>1</sup>

#### *Hamlet's Humor.*

One of the most outstanding characteristics of Hamlet is his subtle and persistent humor. It crops out at every turn, and indicates the essential soundness of his mind. Madness does not lie this way. Though his troubles were sufficient and his task difficult enough

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Snider, *Shakespeare Commentaries*, Tragedies, chapters on *Hamlet*, pp. 286 ff. St. Louis, 1887.

to unbalance almost any mind, yet Hamlet retains from first to last a calm and firm grasp of the situation in both its complexity and its incongruity. No character in all Shakespeare is more evenly balanced, and no mind more capable of seeing things in all their bearings.

If Hamlet does not really go mad under his unparalleled griefs and burdens it is because under all circumstances his grim and tragic humor holds evenly the balance of his mind. In some of the most tragic moments of his career he has the sanity to play with his tormentors and with the sad conditions of his life. As Sir Herbert Tree has recently said: "But for humor he should go mad. *Sanity is humor.*"<sup>1</sup>

The same eminent critic asserts that, "If the quality of humor is important in comedy, it is, I venture to say, yet more important in tragedy, whether it be in the tragedy of life or in the tragedy of the theatre."<sup>2</sup> With reference to this element of humor in the play of *Hamlet* Sir Herbert Tree says: "In *Hamlet*, for instance, the firmament of tragedy is made blacker by the jewels of humor with which it is bestarred. . . . The first words Hamlet sighs forth are in the nature of a pun:

"A little more than kin, and less than kind."

✓ "The king proceeds: 'How is it that the clouds still hang on you?' 'Not so, my lord; I am too much in the sun,' says Hamlet, toying with grief. Again, after the ghost leaves, Hamlet in a tornado of passionate

<sup>1</sup> "Humor in Tragedy," by Sir Herbert Tree. Article in *The English Review*, November, 1915. In dealing with the present topic I find myself greatly indebted to this lecture by the distinguished actor and critic.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 352.

verbiage, gives way to humor. Then he proceeds to think too precisely on the event. But for his humor Hamlet would have killed the king in the first act."<sup>1</sup>

In nearly all his references to the condition of affairs in Denmark, Hamlet indulges in a grim, satirical humor. His first meeting with Horatio furnishes opportunity. Directly after the warm greetings between the friends the following conversation takes place:

*Hamlet.* But what is your affair in Elsinore? . . .

*Horatio.* My lord, I came to see your father's funeral.

*Hamlet.* I pray thee, do not mock me, fellow-student;  
I think it was to see my mother's wedding.

*Horatio.* Indeed, my lord, it follow'd hard upon.

*Hamlet.* Thrift, thrift, Horatio! the funeral baked-meats  
Did coldly furnish forth the marriage tables.

(I. ii. 174-180.)

Again, when Hamlet is swearing his friends to secrecy concerning the ghost, they hear the voice of the ghost beneath, saying, "Swear," and Hamlet remarks:

"Ah, ha, boy! say'st thou so? art there, true-penny—  
Come on; you hear this fellow in the cellarage;  
Consent to swear."

When, after shifting their ground, the ghost's voice is again heard, saying, "Swear," Hamlet says:

"Well said, old mole! canst work i' the earth so fast?  
A worthy pioner!"

(I. v. 148-163)

After his play, *The Mouse-trap*, Hamlet feels so elated at the turn of events and his success in getting evidence of the king's guilt that he playfully suggests to Horatio that if all else failed him he might make a success of playing and get a share in a company:

*Hamlet.* Would not this, sir, and a forest of feathers,—if the rest of my fortunes turn Turk with me,—with two Provincial

<sup>1</sup> "Humor in Tragedy," p. 366.

roses on my razed shoes, get me a fellowship in a cry of players, sir?

*Horatio.* Half a share.

*Hamlet.* A whole one, I.

For thou dost know, O Damon dear,  
This realm dismantled was  
Of Jove himself; and now reigns here  
A very, very—pajock.

*Horatio.* You might have rhymed.

(III. ii. 263-273).

Even in his conversation with Ophelia there is a touch of Hamlet's ironical humor. He slanders himself, saying: "I could accuse me of such things that it were better my mother had not borne me." Then, after Ophelia's false declaration that her father is "at home, my lord," he falls to railing on women and marriage, and says to her:

"I heard of your paintings, too, well enough; God has given you one face, and you make yourselves another: you jig, you amble, and you lisp, and nickname God's creatures, and make your wantonness your ignorance. Go to, I'll no more marriages; those that are married already, all but one, shall live; the rest shall keep as they are. To a nunnery, go."

(III. i. 142-9.)

In talking with the various spies that the king sends to catch him, Hamlet indulges in much humor and banter. He seems to take particular delight in plaguing old Polonius with his sarcasm and nonsense. When Polonius comes to him, asking, "Do you know me, my lord?" Hamlet quickly retorts: "Excellent well; you are a fishmonger." Then, after further satirical banter of the same sort, in reply to Polonius's inquiry what he is reading, he answers: "Slanders, sir; for the satirical rogue says here that old men have grey beards, that their faces are wrinkled . . . and that

they have a plentiful lack of wit, together with most weak hams. . . ." (II. ii. 173-199).

Again, on the occasion when Polonius comes to summon him to the queen's presence, Hamlet pokes fun at the old fellow, making him say that "yonder cloud," first, is "like a camel," then, "like a weasel," and, finally, "like a whale." (III. ii. 359-365.) No wonder Polonius does not know what to make of him and calls him mad, though recognizing the possibility that there may be some "method in't."

Another aspect of Hamlet's humor glints forth in his dealings with his old school-fellows, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. When these unconscionable spies come to him to inquire what he had done with the dead body of Polonius, he first answers: "Compounded it with dust, whereto 't is kin." Then he suggests that Rosencrantz is only "a sponge . . . that soaks up the king's countenance, his rewards, his authorities. . . . When he needs what you have gleaned, it is but squeezing you, and, sponge, you shall be dry again." (IV. ii.)

With Osric he gives way to a bantering and jeering humor very similar to that with Polonius. He first calls him a "water-fly," then "a chough . . . spacious in the possession of dirt." When Osric says, as an excuse for not keeping his hat on his head, that "'tis very hot," Hamlet makes him say that on the contrary, "It is indifferent cold, my lord, indeed," and the next moment again that "it is very sultry and hot." (V. ii. 83-99.)

In the graveyard scene with the clowns Hamlet indulges freely in a grim and melancholy humor. On the first skull he says: "It might be the pate of a politician . . . one that would circumvent God, might it

not?" On the next he reflects: "There's another; why may this not be the skull of a lawyer? Where be his quiddits now, his quilletts, his cases, his tenures, and his tricks? Why does he suffer this rude knave now to knock him about the sconce with a dirty shovel, and will not tell him of his action of battery?" Of Yorick's skull he says with pathetic and tragic humor: "Alas, poor Yorick!—I knew him, Horatio; a fellow of infinite jest, of most excellent fancy." Then to the skull he says: "Where be your gibes now? your gambols? your songs? your flashes of merriment, that were wont to set the table on a roar? Not one now, to mock your grinning? quite chop-fallen?" (V. i.)

"Even in dying," as Sir Herbert Tree says, "he breaks into a sweet irony of humor, in meeting the 'fell serjeant death.' 'The rest is silence.' Hamlet ends as he began, in humor's minor key. Here is the humor of tragedy with a vengeance. Poor Hamlet, too much humor had'st thou for this harsh world!"<sup>1</sup>

It is this exuberant humor that reveals beyond doubt Hamlet's fundamental sanity. Shakespeare was too good a judge of character and of human nature to mingle such humor with madness. He has given Hamlet nearly all varieties of humor, from the playful to the sardonic. Speaking of the king, Hamlet's humor is caustic and satirical. To Polonius and the other spies he is playful and contemptuous. In the graveyard over the skulls he is sardonic and pathetic, and over Yorick's he is melancholy. In all alike he is sane and thoughtful. This unfailing humor that toys with life's comedies and tragedies alike does not come from madness, but from sanity and self-possession. This should make certain the real soundness as well as the

<sup>1</sup> "Humor in Tragedy," p. 367.

great fertility of Hamlet's mind. Humor and madness do not travel the same road.

*“Hamlet's Transformation.”*

The Hamlet that appears in the drama is not the Hamlet with whom the other characters of the play are familiar. Up to the opening of the play there had been apparently nothing about him to mark him off from his friends and companions. He had grown up with no noticeable qualities or peculiarities, and had had no other plan of life than that which young princes generally pursue. He had been at college, acquiring the education and culture proper to his place in life. He appears to have grown up to the strength of a noble young manhood as the leader of a group of friends, all of whom esteemed him highly. He was a good friend, a devoted son, a most popular prince, and was not moved by any great ambitions, nor by any designs against any one.

But when he first appears on the stage in the royal presence (I. ii), he is marked as a melancholy man. His mother remonstrates with him for going about with his eyes downcast, and for being morose and sad. His mother even requests him to leave off his mourning garments, his “inky cloak” as he calls it, and accuses him of mourning over-much for his father. The king, too, tries to draw him away from his sorrows, by reminding him that he is not the first to lose a father, saying, “your father lost a father.” Then he thinks to console him by suggesting that he will himself be a father to him, and that he is next heir to the throne. The king denies his request, however, to return to the university, and says that instead they will have plentiful festivities in Denmark. At a later time he speaks of the great

change in him as "Hamlet's transformation," and instructs his courtiers "To draw him on to pleasures." (II. ii. 15.) At the same time the king begins to wonder if there is anything afflicting Hamlet besides the death of his father.

Hamlet's melancholy, as we know, was due not so much to the suddenness and unexpectedness of his father's death, as to the suspicious circumstances. He knew that the king had stolen his "precious diadem," when he secured his own immediate election to the crown of Denmark, but he seemed to grieve very little over his loss. He knew also that there was an unseemly haste in the marriage of the king and his mother that reflected somewhat upon her honor. Then he had suspicions that the death of his father was not as it was given out, but that there was some foul play on his uncle's part. The interview with the ghost had made this more than a suspicion.

The revelations of the ghost wrought a great change in the mind and habits of Hamlet. In an instant he experienced another transformation that was to change him into an active participant in passing events. This change was chiefly a subjective and moral transformation, which he tried to conceal, especially from the king. The ghost had called upon him to revenge the murder, and he had definitely dedicated himself to that great task. He had promised the ghost that he would wipe from the table of his memory "all trivial fond records":

"And thy commandment all alone shall live  
Within the book and volume of my brain."  
(I. v. 102-3)

This change, however, he could not conceal entirely, for it manifested itself in his outer behavior. Ophelia

noticed it when he next visited her and spoke of it to her father. He had been accustomed to such a scrupulous neatness in dress and courtliness of manner that she later spoke of him as "The glass of fashion, and the mould of form." (III. i. 153.) But now all this had disappeared, and he grew careless about his apparel, and even came to her in loose attire, and painfully nervous:

"Pale as his shirt; his knees knocking each other;  
And with a look so piteous in purport  
As if he had been loosed out of hell  
To speak of horrors."

(II. i. 81-84.)

To this offence he added the apparent rudeness of staring her in the face for some time, and then went out of the door keeping his eye upon her to the last. Hamlet was evidently testing her to see if she was likely to be true to him in the new task the ghost had assigned him.

This visit of the ghost, then, marked the adoption of his new purpose, and changed the whole trend of his life. Henceforth, the revenge becomes his one all-absorbing aim. His conception of duty hereafter rules, and he makes everything else subservient. His whole life is now to be devoted to his filial duty. This great change in his life the dramatist has portrayed fully for his audience that they may be impressed with the effect of the ghost's visit upon the mind of Hamlet, and that they may realize its importance in the development of both plot and character.

#### *Hamlet's Melancholy.*

From the opening of the play Hamlet has been marked as a melancholy man. Apparently this had not

been his previous character, for the king has spoken of it as "Hamlet's transformation." This change in him was brought about by brooding on the events that had just happened, and had been not only a mental but especially a moral reaction.

Hamlet is portrayed as having a very sensitive and a very moral nature. He had been greatly shocked by the things that had happened, and the suspicions he harbored constituted a direct challenge to his moral faith. If the truth was as he feared, then there was occasion to question the righteousness and justice of the world, and to wonder if life were worth living. This, apparently, was Hamlet's first encounter with great trouble, with the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune, and it proved a great trial to his moral nature.

When the first of these disturbing events occurred, Hamlet was at the university, and apparently he did not arrive in Denmark until they had all come to pass. The first of these was the sudden death of his father; caused as it was given out by a serpent's sting. The circumstances were suspicious and pointed to his uncle, Claudius, but there was no certain evidence.

Then followed immediately the election of Claudius as the new king, apparently before Hamlet could reach Denmark. The great popularity of Hamlet and the great love the people bore him, were doubtless known by him, and would cause him to think his uncle had tricked him in the matter of the election.

Within two months followed his mother's marriage to his uncle Claudius, which she herself afterward spoke of as their "o'erhasty marriage." To Hamlet this seemed so improper, and followed so hard upon the funeral of his father that he sarcastically spoke of it as due to

"Thrift, thrift, Horatio! the funeral baked-meats  
Did coldly furnish forth the marriage tables."  
(I. ii. 180-1.)

These events had all occurred before the opening of the play, for when his uncle and mother appear on the stage for the first time (I. ii.) they are already king and queen. Hamlet, then, confronts these as accomplished facts, and his mind is troubled. The suspected villainy of his father's sudden death caused him great worry. He was not much concerned about losing the crown. But he was stirred to the depths of his moral nature by what he regarded as his mother's incestuous and o'erhasty marriage.

Added to these was the further fact that under the rule of Claudius his beloved Denmark was degenerating and being given over to corruption and to pleasure. Everything seemed to him to have gone wrong. His father is dead, his mother dishonored, and his country disgraced and weakened.

Under these conditions it is little wonder that he became melancholy, and was in doubt whether or not it was worth while to live. All he was chiefly interested in had failed. The men who were left did not interest him nor the women either. He was thrown cruelly back upon himself, and obliged to weigh everything anew. His confidence in the moral government of the world was shaken, and his moral faith was shattered. Everything that was most dear to him had apparently been forsaken of heaven, and he was left to struggle on alone. Under these adverse circumstances he wishes he were dead, and exclaims against the world:

"How weary, stale, flat and unprofitable  
Seem to me all the uses of this world!"  
(I. ii. 133-4.)

This, then, is Hamlet's melancholy. It is the melancholy of the philosophical mind, and is induced by the evils into the midst of which his young life is suddenly plunged. The course of the play discloses his efforts to overcome his doubts and to regain his native faith in God and in goodness and to right the wrongs about him. The greatness of his mind and character is seen in the fact that he soon recovers from the first rude shock, and holding his faith in the ultimate victory of truth and right, he concludes that "It is not, nor it cannot come to good." (I. ii. 158.) Never again does he allow himself to fall into the slough of despond, but through darkness and light he holds to his faith in right.

*Hamlet a National Hero. ~~represents~~ <sup>less hope</sup>*

There is no doubt that Hamlet from the first understood his task as more than taking the life of the king. With the rebellion of Fortinbras threatening, and on the "background of general corruption" which the rule of Claudius had induced, he saw his task to be a gigantic national undertaking. He was not called merely to the physical labor of the hangman, but to the moral task of the restorer of righteousness. To take the life of the murderer needed only the nerve of the common assassin, but to "revenge" the death of the late king called for wisdom and tact of the highest order. He well knew that he could not purge his country with an assassin's dagger, nor purify it by the king's blood. Unlike Fortinbras and Laertes, his passion was not vindictiveness, and could not be satisfied by avenging a guilty king on an innocent nation.

An immediate attack upon the king, then, might have been courageous, but it would have been foolhardy, and would have frustrated Hamlet's larger designs. The

king was beginning to have a wholesome fear of Hamlet, and seemed to live in dread lest he should raise up an open rebellion against him. He thought himself of bringing the issue with Hamlet to public accounting, but he was afraid of Hamlet's popularity, as he later admits to Laertes,

"Why to a public count I might not go,  
Is the great love the general gender bear him."  
(IV. vii. 17-18.)

Nothing would have been easier than for Hamlet to make it a public issue. If it was easy for Laertes at a later time to raise up a band against the king whom he thought had killed his father, it would have been doubly easy now for Hamlet, who according to Claudius himself was "loved of the distracted multitude." But this was the very thing Hamlet wished to avoid. He sees his nation already preparing to resist the threatened attack from Norway, and with heroic self-restraint and true patriotism he refrains from anything that might encourage the enemy. He is commissioned rather to save his country, as well from foreign aggression, as from the internal corruption that threatens its very existence. The case is desperate and the task difficult, and he would gladly pursue a more tranquil career. But he rises to the necessity, howsoever reluctantly, and steadfastly pursues his appointed task.

In all this Hamlet remembers the warning of the ghost not to taint his mind. He obeys the injunction to keep a clear conscience, and not make himself a worse criminal in revenging the crime of his uncle. This marks the higher purpose and superior nobleness of character that Shakespeare has put into his Hamlet, thereby raising the tone of his play above all other versions of the story. The spirit of some other versions

of the Hamlet story is very different, as may be gathered from the German play, *Fratricide Punished*, where we find in the Prologue the following injunction to the prince: "Therefore be ready to sow the seeds of disunion, mingle passion with their marriage, and put jealousy in their hearts. Kindle a fire of revenge, let the sparks fly over the whole realm; entangle kinsmen in the net of crime, and give joy to hell, so that those who swim in the sea of murder may soon drown."<sup>1</sup>

This, however, was the very thing that Hamlet made every effort to avoid. As in the version of Belleforest, Hamlet was a deliverer of his people. He tried to save his beloved country from the unjust and corrupt rule of the king, and, as Shakespeare has added to his story, he had also to ward off the threatened attack of Fortinbras. Shakespeare has, therefore, made his task doubly difficult. He must revenge his father, which means he must deliver Denmark from the corrupting rule of Claudius. And he must do this without laying the country open to an attack from Fortinbras. The dramatist has made his task more complicated and hence more difficult than in any other version of the story. But in carrying him through without complete failure in either of his purposes, he has depicted in him a true national hero.

#### *Hamlet a Man of Peace.*

In Hamlet, then, Shakespeare has portrayed a kind of national hero that was new to his age. As the elder Hamlet would not make war except to save his country from attack, the younger Hamlet would do nothing that would bring about a civil war in Denmark, or that would invite an invasion from Fortinbras. This young

<sup>1</sup> Furness's translation, *Variorum Hamlet*, II. p. 122.

prince was of a different stripe, and waged wars for ambition. As his captain expressed it:

"We go to gain a little patch of ground  
That hath in it no profit but the name."  
(IV. iv. 18-19.)

This was the old type of hero, who like the Roman generals laid other nations under tribute and brought many captives home to Rome. This old nationalism was aggressive and ruthless, and gloried in subjugating other peoples to its rule.

But Shakespeare had a vision of a new type of hero and of a new nationalism of peace. In the elder and younger Hamlet he has depicted heroes who would not force war upon others, and who would consent to war only to hold the possessions they had from the spoiler. The older wars had been the quarrels of ambitious and greedy kings who had not hesitated like the elder Fortinbras to dare his neighbors to combat in the hope of gaining territory or tribute. With these wars Shakespeare was entirely out of sympathy, as so many of his plays give evidence. His Henry the Fifth will not go to war to steal from France, but only to rescue those provinces which are assuredly his by right.

Shakespeare's Hamlet, then, is a patriot and hero of a new type, who aims only to do what is for the good of his country. Werder, therefore, is surely right when he says his purpose is not so much to punish Claudius as to bring him to justice,—to "revenge" his father's murder. His very inaction, wrongly called procrastination, assumes the character of the highest self-restraint and patriotism. His one fault is that he cannot always completely restrain himself in the face of such terrible provocation, and he occasionally suffers himself to act rashly and without due deliberation.

Many writers have answered the old error of the Goethe-Coleridge theory that Hamlet is incapable of action. On the contrary, he is quite capable of instant and swift action. He very quickly avails himself of the services of the players brought to court to amuse him, and turns them to good account. When he discovers some one behind the arras in his interview with his mother, he makes a sudden and daring pass that shows him not only capable of action but of impetuous and instant action. Again, on shipboard he proves himself gallant in boarding the pirate ship. And in the last encounter of the play, when treachery and villainy are manifest, he quickly dispatches not only Laertes but also the king.

*problem*  
The trouble with Hamlet is not inability to act, but an occasional inability to restrain himself in the midst of great provocation. It is only his determined intention to follow the ways of peace that holds him back at all. In the main he has most admirable self-control, and acts only as he has deliberately planned. In so great an undertaking as the revenge of his father amidst the troubled conditions of the times he needs to lay his plans well and be sure before he strikes, in order not to fail in his purpose or to give occasion for further trouble. It is only his occasional failure to restrain himself that is the immediate cause of the fatality of the drama.

## IV

*The King and Hamlet.*

From the beginning of the play Hamlet has been a great problem and perplexity to the king. As the one living person most grievously injured by the murder of

the late king, the guilty conscience of Claudius compels him to keep an eye on Hamlet. He has shown such diabolical cleverness in the murder of his brother that at first he has little fear that Hamlet will discover the truth. He is alarmed at his melancholy, and the first words he addresses to him in the play disclose his anxiety:

"But now, my cousin Hamlet, and my son, . . .  
How is it that the clouds still hang on you?"  
(I. ii. 64, 66.)

Assuming that his sadness all comes from the death of his father, the king tries to reconcile Hamlet to the death by reminding him that "all that lives must die, Passing through nature to eternity." (72-3.) Seeing he cannot divert Hamlet's mind by chiding him, he then commends him for mourning for his father, and tries to turn his mind to his own affairs by saying to him, "You are the most immediate to our throne," and denies his request to return to Wittenberg, begging him,

"to remain  
Here, in the cheer and comfort of our eye,  
Our chiefest courtier, cousin, and our son."  
(I. ii. 115-7.)

This feigned solicitude on behalf of Hamlet, the king carries out very adroitly, and succeeds in impressing it upon his henchmen. Rosencrantz has learned it, and at a later time gives it utterance. When he tries to draw out of him the cause of his distemper, Hamlet replies: "Sir, I lack advancement." Then Rosen-crantz quickly responds: "How can that be, when you have the voice of the king himself for your succession in Denmark?" (III. ii. 325-326.)

All this, of course, fails to deceive Hamlet, who is only made the sadder by the assurance of the king's

dissimulation. In the great soliloquy in which he unburdens his heart, he sees no way out of his sorrows, and wishes that he might die. With no jot of any objective evidence, and with his suspicions plaguing him, Hamlet finds it necessary to conduct himself circumspectly in all his dealings with the king. Morally certain of the king's guilt, and assured of his depraved character, he breaks out into a flood of inquiries when first he sees his father's ghost. He begs piteously of the ghost,

"Let me not burst in ignorance; but tell  
Why thy canoniz'd bones, hearsed in death,  
Have burst their cerements; . . .  
Say, why is this? wherefore? what should we do?"  
(I. iv. 46-57.)

There can be no doubt that after the disclosures of the ghost Hamlet wanted to kill the king. He evidently had this as part of his plan, and was awaiting only the proper time. He not only conceived it as no wrong, but even as a moral duty. He later said to Horatio,

"is't not perfect conscience  
To quit him with this arm? and is't not to be damn'd,  
To let this canker of our nature come  
In further evil?"

(V. ii. 67-70.)

He wanted to kill the king, and, doubtless, as Bradley says, "without sacrificing his own life or freedom." He did not want to leave "a wounded name," but as Werder thinks he hoped to make it appear to the people as a right and proper revenge for the king's crime. And he therefore waited only for such objective evidence as would confirm his suspicions and as could be presented to the people. Hamlet had no desire to play the part

of an assassin, but his conception of duty made him ~~willing to take up the task of moral avenger.~~

The first step in the confirmation of Hamlet's suspicions was the disclosures of the ghost. This, however, did not fully and finally convince him, for he thought he might be deceived and the spirit he had seen might be an evil spirit that was trying to lead him to destruction:

"The spirit that I have seen  
May be the devil; and the devil hath power  
To assume a pleasing shape; yea, and perhaps  
Out of my weakness and my melancholy,  
As he is very potent with such spirits,  
Abuses me to damn me."

(II. ii. 574-579.)

He therefore resolves not to act without further evidence, and to await, as he says, "grounds More relative." (ll. 579-80.)

For some time no means of obtaining the required evidence was at hand. Hamlet therefore had nothing to do but wait. The wished-for opportunity came only with the advent of the players. He had failed entirely to obtain any objective evidence of the suspected murder, but he at once saw in the play the chance to secure some real evidence. His quick wit seized upon the idea of having the players enact a scene like the reported murder of his father, and the response of the king to this play would reveal beyond doubt his guilt or innocence:

"I'll have these players  
Play something like the murder of my father  
Before mine uncle; I'll observe his looks;  
I'll tent him to the quick; if he but blench,  
I know my course."

(II. ii. 570-4.)

Before the enactment of the play he took Horatio into his confidence, telling him that one scene of the play would "come near the circumstance, Which I have told thee, of my father's death." (III. ii. 71-2.) Then he asked him to observe his uncle, and afterwards they would consult together and judge "his seeming."

### *The Polonius Family.*

In all his treacherous and nefarious undertakings the king found willing accomplices and tools. The chief of these was his crafty and unscrupulous old steward, Polonius. From the beginning there is evidence that the king had had assistance from him in the murder of his brother. When Laertes asked permission to return to Paris the king showed evidence of his obligation to Polonius by assuring Laertes that he would do whatever Polonius desired in the matter:

"The head is not more native to the heart,  
The hand more instrumental to the mouth,  
Than is the throne of Denmark to thy father.  
What wouldest thou have, Laertes?"

(I. ii. 47-50.)

When Polonius requests it, the king immediately gives his permission for Laertes to return to Paris.

On his part, Polonius is at the king's service, and is prepared to go any length to please him:

"I hold my duty, as I hold my soul,  
Both to my God and to my gracious king."

(II. ii. 44-5.)

Just what assistance he had rendered the king in disposing of his brother and securing the crown the play does not make clear. But the deep debt the king acknowledges to Polonius suggests some very important and valuable service. Hamlet from the first knows he

is dishonest and untrustworthy. When Polonius represents being called a "fishmonger," Hamlet says: "Then I would you were so honest a man." (II. ii. 175.)

The parting scene with Laertes discloses the subtle and crafty character of the entire Polonius family, and reveals further their close relation to the royal household. Even Laertes appears as a suspicious and not over-honorable young man. His parting advice to his sister shows him to have an evil mind, and exhibits him as crafty and "wise," but not generous or noble-minded. Ophelia on her part suspects that her brother, while exhorting her to virtue, himself follows pleasure:

"But, good my brother,  
Do not, as some ungracious pastors do,  
Show me the steep and thorny way to heaven,  
Whiles, like a puff'd and reckless libertine,  
Himself the primrose path of dalliance treads  
And recks not his own rede."

(I. iii. 46-51.)

Polonius himself appears exceedingly sagacious and cunning, and entirely lacking in moral principles. He is perfectly willing to do any bidding of the king, and is only a crafty old time-server. His advice to his daughter shows him very politic and very indelicate, but entirely lacking in the larger wisdom. Ophelia herself is a tender-hearted maiden, but her rearing under the tuition of her subtle father has made her weak and tractable. This scene depicts the entire family in a very unfavorable light, that is not substantially changed throughout the rest of the play.

Polonius is so naturally suspicious and crafty that he even spies upon Laertes in Paris. On sending Reynaldo to him with money, he instructs him before he visits Laertes "to make inquiry Of his behavior." (II.

i. 4-5.) The methods he instructs Reynaldo to employ are in themselves low and dishonorable.

It is in connection with Ophelia, however, that the base, unscrupulous character of Polonius is most in evidence. He induces this poor, foolish girl to give up her letters from Hamlet that he may look them over and read them to the king in order to see if they can find anything to trap Hamlet. He is completely at the king's service, and when he inquires of the king, "What do you think of me?" the king replies, "As of a man faithful and honorable." (II. ii. 128-129.) Polonius is so well satisfied with his own ability as a spy that he assures the king he will find out the mystery of Hamlet without doubt, for he can find truth even when hid in the centre of the earth. (II. ii. 157-8.)

The master-piece of the old man's villainy, however, is his use of his daughter as a decoy to entrap Hamlet. In his zeal to serve the king he does not hesitate to sacrifice his daughter, for which Hamlet calls him "Jephthah." He arranges with the king that some time when Hamlet is walking in the lobby, as he frequently does, then

"At such a time I'll loose my daughter to him;  
Be you and I behind an arras then."  
(II. ii. 161-2.)

This suits the king admirably, and he explains it to the queen, requesting her withdrawal:

"For we have closely sent for Hamlet hither,  
That he, as 'twere by accident, may here  
Affront Ophelia.  
Her father and myself, lawful espials,  
Will so bestow ourselves that, seeing unseen,  
We may of their encounter frankly judge."  
(III. i. 29-34.)

In the interview Hamlet treats Ophelia most honorably until he discovers that he is speaking as well to ears behind the arras. Most students, and especially the actors, are conscious of deficient stage directions for this scene, and recognize the need of some visible or audible move upon the part of Polonius or the king that reveals their presence to Hamlet.<sup>1</sup> At once the tone of Hamlet changes, and he turns harshly upon Ophelia, and takes back all words of affection. Then, apparently thinking she may not realize the baseness of her treachery and thinking to give her one more chance to disavow her part in it, he inquires, "Where's your father?" When she replies, "At home, my lord," he is sure not only that she is a party to the spying but that she is also untruthful. Then with a few harsh words he leaves her, never to trust her again.

It is Hamlet's fate to be concerned in the death of all the Polonius family. Ophelia, discarded, broods over her misfortune, and at last goes distracted. No doubt the sadness and disappointment of her relations with Hamlet had something to do with her madness and her death. Polonius himself pays for his treachery with his life the next time he attempts to spy upon Hamlet in the interview with the queen. Laertes survives until induced by the king to accept the duel with Hamlet, when he is killed with the poisoned rapier he had treacherously prepared for the prince. He lived to discover the insidious designs of the king in arranging the duel, and to repent his part in it. He acknowledged his own wrong-doing, saying, "I am justly kill'd with mine own treachery" (V. ii. 294), and with his dying words absolved Hamlet from all blame

<sup>1</sup> Cf. *Some Thoughts on Hamlet*, by H. B. Irving, pp. 21-22, Sydney, Australia, 1911.

either for his father's or his own death, and begged his forgiveness:

“Exchange forgiveness with me, noble Hamlet;  
Mine and my father's death come not upon thee,  
Nor mine on me!”

(V. ii. 316-8.)

### *Hamlet's School-Fellows.*

The king had also other willing but less capable spies in his service. We find him using two of Hamlet's playmates (II. ii. 11) and school-fellows, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern (III. iv. 202), pretending to be anxious to remedy Hamlet's trouble. He instructs these young men,

“To draw him on to pleasures, and to gather . . .  
Whether aught to us unknown afflicts him thus.”  
(II. ii. 15-17.)

The king seems to hope and to fear against hope that his nephew has no suspicions of the murder, though he thinks it best to watch him very carefully. At first these old friends of Hamlet's may not have known the treachery of the king, and may not have intended to be used against him, but later they prove themselves the willing tools of any baseness the king can devise. They continued to do the king's bidding after Hamlet had made it very apparent that he regarded them as traitors to his own interests.

With the resourcefulness that so often characterizes the desperate man, the king utilizes these henchmen to try to discover the mystery of Hamlet. But Hamlet is easily more than a match for them, as he was for Polonius, and they very soon find out that he is not open for inspection. They approach Hamlet just as Polonius is leaving, without having gained any informa-

tion, but not in time to hear Hamlet's remark, "These tedious old fools." They are received very cordially by Hamlet, and greeted by him as "My excellent good friends," in a way to shame them of their mission, if they had any shame in them.

The fact that they were handed on to him by Polonius seems to put Hamlet on his guard. Almost at once he asks them what brought them hither, and when they cannot answer clearly he puts it to them more pointedly, "what make you at Elsinore?" Their evasive answer leads him to ask directly, "Were you not sent for?" and they confess they were. This exceeding smallness of their characters leads him to try to shame them by his eloquent words on the greatness of man: "What a piece of work is man! how noble in reason! how infinite in faculty! in form and moving, how express and admirable! in action how like an angel! in apprehension, how like a god! the beauty of the world! the paragon of animals!" (II. ii. 295-9.) **They** are not shamed and not warned, however, but like the simple pass on and are punished.

These intimations that Hamlet is not unconscious of their mission do not dissuade them from further attempts. After the play, they try him once more, and again fail, this time ignominiously. They are not so wise and clever at dissembling as Polonius, and it does not take Hamlet long to turn the tables on them. Very stupidly they ask him directly, "What is the cause of your distemper?" When they admit they cannot play upon the pipe he offers them, he turns sharply on them, saying, "You would play upon me," and ends up by telling them, "Call me what instrument you will, though you can fret me, you cannot play upon me." (III. ii. 354-5.)

In spite of this complete exposure; they continue to act the part of traitors. Their last treachery is to assist in Hamlet's banishment to England, and but for his adroitness they would have been participants in his execution. They were such willing and unscrupulous agents of the king that Hamlet has no compunctions in turning their treachery upon themselves and contriving that they be "hoist with their own petar."

There is no need to shed tears over these traitors. Though Hamlet was a very unwilling "scourge and minister" of heaven in the death of Polonius, he has no hesitation in preparing revenge upon these school-fellows. He wept bitter tears for killing Polonius, even though he recognized the justice of his death, but he did not weep over the fate of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. In view of the baseness of their act and the great issues at stake for himself and his country, he recognizes the moral retribution of the end that overtakes them:

"They are not near my conscience; their defeat  
Does by their own insinuation grow."

(V. ii. 58-59.)

The baseness of these spies, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, as well as Polonius, serves to reveal further the desperate character of the king. He was ready to use every treachery against Hamlet, and would not stop before putting him to death. No doubt it was only the great popularity of Hamlet in Denmark and the fear that any treachery might be discovered that prevented him from committing another murder. His dealings with Hamlet, apart from the ghost's words and his own confession, make clear to us that he was quite capable of the murder of his brother. But his adroitness in covering up the traces of his villainy make Hamlet's

task very difficult. And the retribution that finally overtakes him is not more for the foul murder of his brother than for the new treachery of the duel.

*Hamlet and Ophelia.*

The relations of Hamlet and Ophelia, and the apparent cruelty of her casting-off, have been the subject of much discussion. Hamlet himself appears to have found it almost heartbreaking to discard her, and finally did so only when convinced that she was treacherous and untruthful. Any condemnation or justification of Hamlet's conduct in this sad affair can be reached only by a very careful consideration of all the circumstances.

There is much evidence in the play that Hamlet once loved Ophelia sincerely. The parting words of Laertes to his sister as he is about to return to Paris make it clear that Hamlet had long been known as her lover. (I. iii.) Hamlet's letter assured her of his unalterable love, and vowed that he loved her best. (II. ii.) In the scene in which Polonius and the king are concealed behind the arras, he told her "I did love you once." (III. i. 114-15.) And in the burial scene, over her dead body, he uttered the words, "I loved Ophelia," and went on to say that his love was more than that of forty thousand brothers. (V. i. 257-9.) Ophelia herself thought he loved her, and reported to her father that, "He hath, my lord, of late made many tenders of his affection to me." (I. iii. 99-100.)

Other persons of the play also thought he loved her. The queen said mournfully at the funeral, "I hoped thou shouldst have been my Hamlet's wife." (V. i. 232.) Laertes was at first doubtful of his love for her but later admits, "Perhaps he loves you now."

(I. iii. 14.) Polonius, too, had his doubts, and was convinced only by Hamlet's visit to Ophelia in which he appeared ungroomed and troubled in mind. (II. i.) Even the king seemed satisfied that Hamlet's love for Ophelia was genuine and honorable.

At first, Laertes and Polonius were unwilling to believe that Hamlet had honorable intentions toward Ophelia. Laertes was the first to warn his sister against Hamlet, and to suggest to her that Hamlet wished only to take advantage of her. And Polonius likewise warns her against him, saying that his vows are "But mere implorators of unholy suits." (I. iii. 129.) He therefore instructs her to repel his letters and to deny him access to her. (II. i. 108-110.)

The reason for this scepticism was that neither Laertes nor Polonius thought Hamlet, as a Prince, could marry the daughter of a chamberlain. Laertes assured his sister that Hamlet would not be free to choose a wife for himself, but would be "subject to his birth," and that his choice would be settled by the necessities of the state. (I. iii. 17-24.) Polonius at first did not deign to make this explanation to her when he warned her against Hamlet, but seems later to have reminded her that "Lord Hamlet is a prince, out of thy star." (II. ii. 140.) At first, then, Polonius said, "I fear'd he did but trifle" (II. i. 112), though later he appears to be convinced of the reality of Hamlet's love.

In view of his love for her, Hamlet did not find it easy to give up Ophelia. Even to the last he loved her, though he found it impossible to marry her. For this, there appear to be two reasons. In the first place, he found love and marriage incompatible with his task of revenging his father. As soon as he received the

revelations of the ghost he realized that his task would require the renunciation of every other plan of life, and the abandonment of every other hope and ambition. He promised the ghost to "wipe away all trivial fond records," and assured the ghost that

"thy commandment all alone shall live  
Within the book and volume of my brain,  
Unmix'd with baser matter."

(I. v. 102-4.)

Hamlet may have thought that his great task would absorb all his energies, and tax all his powers, not leaving any opportunity for love and marriage; or he may have thought that in his hazardous adventure he would likely lose his life. In either case, love and marriage were not for him.

It is quite likely, however, that there was also another reason as well. Hamlet seems to have been convinced that Ophelia did not now love him, whatever might have been the case in the past. When Ophelia remarked about the prologue to his play of *The Mouse-trap* that "'Tis brief, my lord," he instantly retorted, doubtless thinking both of his mother and of her, "As woman's love." (III. ii. 143-4.) Whether the cause of her ceasing to love him was fickleness or an inability to appreciate the noble qualities of his nature, the fact seems to be that Hamlet felt she no longer loved him. It was a great grief to him, and he did not part with her without great sorrow.

Hamlet, however, did not discard her until he found her treacherous and untruthful. Had Ophelia not given herself to her father's schemes against him, he might have continued his affections, but when he was obliged to doubt her fidelity, there was nothing left for him but to cast her off. When he visited her, dishevelled

and nervous, his purpose apparently was to pry into her very soul, and see if he could trust her. The doubts that came to him then were confirmed later when he found her playing the part of decoy for her father. This was the final and convincing evidence of her unworthiness, and he never trusted her after.

Hamlet's behavior toward Ophelia was no doubt cruel, as all such affairs are cruel; but as with his mother later he was cruel only to be kind. It should be recalled that at the time of his parting interview with her Hamlet was very greatly burdened in spirit. He had just spoken his great soliloquy, and had debated with himself the question of pursuing his revenge even at the cost of his life. With this load upon his spirit he must have felt her treachery very keenly. Her assumption of the part of injured innocence while all the time she knew that her father and the king were listening to every word of Hamlet, and then her falsehood when asked about her father, surely revealed her unworthy of the noble Hamlet. It was only then that he suggested she should never marry by saying, "Get thee to a nunnery."

There is no evidence in the play that Ophelia herself actively took part against Hamlet, but only that she accepted the position of decoy for her father's craft and cunning. Her very weakness, however, was itself an enemy to Hamlet's welfare, and he had to leave her. But he felt her faithlessness very keenly. It was not, however, the fault of Hamlet that Ophelia's mind became distracted. The prime cause of her misfortune was rather the suspicions and the treachery of her father and the king, whose innocent victim she was.

But Hamlet never forgot his love for "the fair Ophelia." At the play, when his mother asked him to

sit by her, he lay down at Ophelia's feet instead, saying, "No, good mother, here's metal more attractive." (III. ii. 103.) Ophelia still had some power over him, and he continued near her throughout the play. Then when he found himself at last unwittingly at her funeral, his old love returned and led him to vie with Laertes in the expression of grief and he says:

"I loved Ophelia; forty thousand brothers  
Could not, with all their quantity of love,  
Make up my sum."

(V. i. 257-259.)

It is apparent, then, that though he had cast her off, he never ceased to love her. In her death he pitied her, but he could never scorn her.

### *The Opportunity of the Players.*

In spite of all his efforts and his "antic disposition," Hamlet had not secured any objective evidence that the king was guilty of his father's murder, and he still hesitated to execute the injunctions of the ghost. The first event that afforded him a real opportunity, however, was the bringing of the players to court, presumably to divert him from his melancholy. His quick wit instantly seized upon the occasion given him to turn them to his own account. He welcomes the actors, and recognizes the first player as an old friend, and expects that he will lend himself to his ends. Then he tries out the first player, and after satisfying himself of their ability, he arranges for them to enact a play that he calls *The Murder of Gonzago*. He wants them to have it ready, as he says, by "tò-morrow night."

Hamlet seems greatly pleased at this opportunity. It furnishes him with just the kind of opening he has

awaited, and Hamlet the inactive becomes henceforth Hamlet the valiant. His refraining from killing the king at sight is now seen, for the first time clearly, to be part of a more comprehensive and far-reaching scheme. He instantly grasps the possibilities of this opportunity, and his evident delight is observed by those about him. In reporting the incident to the queen later, Rosencrantz said, "there did seem in him a kind of joy To hear of it." (III. i. 18-19.)

At first Hamlet does not report his plans even to Horatio, and we learn them only from his soliloquy:

"I'll have these players  
Play something like the murder of my father  
Before mine uncle; I'll observe his looks;  
I'll tent him to the quick; if he but blench,  
I know my course."

(II. ii. 570-4.)

In this soliloquy he discloses his mind for the first time. He has hesitated to kill the king on the sole evidence of the ghost, for "the spirit that I have seen May be the devil." He has, therefore, waited for additional evidence:

"I'll have grounds  
More relative than this. The play's the thing  
Wherein I'll catch the conscience of the king."

(II. ii. 579-581.)

#### *Hamlet's Advice to the Players.*

In order that his schemes may not miscarry, Hamlet coaches the players very carefully until he gets them in condition to render his play in a fitting manner before the king. He first instructs them in enunciation, telling them to "Speak the speech, I pray you, as I pronounced it to you, trippingly on the tongue."

(III. ii. 1-2.) Then he warns them against violent gesticulations, saying, "Nor do not saw the air too much with your hands, thus; but use all gently." (4-5.) He exhorts them to temperance in the expression of passion, without, however, falling short of due intensity, urging, "Be not too tame neither, but . . . suit the action to the word, the word to the action; with this special observance: that you o'erstep not the modesty of nature." (15-18.) He reminds them that the one rule of acting is "to hold, as 'twere, the mirror up to nature." (20-1.) The purpose of it all is, he says, "to show virtue her own feature, scorn her own image, and the very age and body of the time his form and pressure." (21-3). He closes his advice by words meant to restrain the activities of the clowns, and keep them in their proper places.

This advice to the players shows the high artistic ideals Hamlet, and Shakespeare, entertained for the drama. It is to retain its previous high character, and is not to be a mere form of amusement either for the groundlings or the better class. It is to keep, too, a very distinct ethical function, and to serve as a means of instructing the people in morals. Acting is to be sincere, and the methods of the drama at once realistic and idealistic. The times should be mirrored on the stage, and yet the whole spirit should be that of high moral idealism. No reference is made to the dramatic controversies of the day, but the entire purport of the advice implies that the dramatist has in mind the romantic drama, with its union of comedy and tragedy, and with its indifference to all "unities" except that of action. The noble words of the advice indicate further the dramatist's intention to endow Hamlet with the highest intellectual and moral character.

*The Play—“The Mouse-trap.”*

The success of Hamlet's little play before the king exceeded his wildest expectations. Horatio and Hamlet carefully watched the king, while seemingly pre-occupied in conversation with the queen and Ophelia. The sight of the dumb-show and of the two chief actors as king and queen makes the king uneasy, lest there should be some offence in it. But Hamlet assures him, ironically, that “they do but jest, poison in jest; no offence i' the world.” When asked the name of his play, he says it is called, figuratively, *The Mouse-trap*, and then gives an outline of the argument. The play, however, proves the undoing of the king, for when he witnesses the poisoning he can endure it no longer and rises and goes out. His guilt is now manifest, as well as the innocence of the queen. She sees no significance in the performance, beyond the play itself, but the king is caught in Hamlet's mouse-trap.

During the performance of the play Hamlet reveals by his excitement the great strain under which he has been living. His anxiety to entrap the king and to observe the least trace of guilt in him as the player king is poisoned leads him beyond the bounds of tact and of discretion. His eagerness to explain the play, and to assure the king that there is no offence in it, together with his comments as the play proceeds, and especially during the poisoning scene, must have convinced the king that Hamlet was consciously trying to entrap him. But so excited was Hamlet that for once he failed in tactfulness. From this time the king was convinced that Hamlet was dangerous, and made all haste to despatch him to England.

With the complete and unmistakable proof of the

king's guilt afforded by the play, Hamlet's delight becomes uncontrollable. He breaks into popular ditties as soon as he is alone with Horatio, and is so well satisfied that he exclaims jubilantly, "I'll take the ghost's word for a thousand pound." (IH. ii. 274-5.) All doubt is now removed, and he is prepared to enter actively upon his task of revenge. This marks another Hamlet "transformation," and from this time he shows a more merry spirit, as Ophelia observes at the play. But the king is now equally alive to the issue, and Hamlet has to encounter equally active opposition. Almost single-handed he has to challenge the king with his host of hirelings, and with all the power and prerogatives of a ruler at his command.

There has been a good deal of discussion about Hamlet's little play. It is apparent from Hamlet's intention of adding to the play "a speech of some dozen or sixteen lines" that it did not altogether suffice as it stood. Diligent search has been made for these additional lines in his play of Gonzago, but they have not been identified. It has been recently suggested that these lines cannot be identified, because, instead of adding to the play he had, Hamlet found it necessary to write an entire new play that would come closer to the circumstances of his father's murder. By this means he was able to depict accurately what the ghost had told, and make a certain test of its truth. The entire success of his play proved beyond doubt that the ghost had been a good spirit and had told him the truth.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Trench, *Shakespeare's Hamlet, a New Commentary*, pp. 108-9, 117-124, 155-160, and Appendix C, pp. 260-6. London: Smith, Elder & Co., 1913.

*The King at Prayer.*

Hamlet has now obtained corroboration of the ghost's accusation of the king. He is no longer in any doubt about it himself. His reluctance to kill the king should now all vanish, if he were waiting only for confirmation of the king's guilt. The Werder theory, then, finds support in its contention that he has still not gained all the evidence he requires, for even this is not objective evidence and would not satisfy public opinion. The evidence he has obtained serves to convince him and Horatio, but would not be accepted as conclusive in a court of law or before the public. Hamlet, however, has lost all his moral reluctance, and henceforth is ready to revenge his father when the opportunity comes.

The play has served to prick the king's conscience, and in his soliloquy now for the first time he acknowledges his guilt, and displays considerable remorse:

"Oh, my offence is rank, it smells to heaven;  
It hath the primal eldest curse upon 't,  
A brother's murder!"

(III. iii. 36-38.)

But he cannot pray, for he is not willing to acknowledge his crime: "May one be pardon'd and retain the offence?" Yet he is constrained to kneel, thinking there may be some virtue in that act, hoping he may be led to repentance and confession. This is the point to which Hamlet apparently wanted to lead him, but he does not repent and cannot pray. Never again does he come so near to the throne of grace, but he passes on unforgiven.

To find the king thus alone seemed also to be Hamlet's long-looked-for opportunity. But once more he withholds his dagger, and instead falls into his habit of philosophy. He recognizes that he has his chance, saying:

"Now might I do it pat, now he is praying;  
And now I'll do't; and so he goes to heaven;  
And so am I revenged."

(III. iii. 73-5.)

But for some reason the conditions do not suit him, and he refrains, saying, "this is hire and salary, not revenge." He thinks the king would go to heaven from his prayers, and so he prefers to kill him some time when he finds him drunk or in some other sin, "that his soul may be as damn'd and black As hell, whereto it goes."

This, however, has seemed to most critics entirely out of accord with the acknowledged moral character of Hamlet. It seems brutal and barbaric, not human or Christian. It has, therefore, been suggested that this passage is not Shakespeare's, but a relic of the old play that Shakespeare has failed to work out of his play, or has for some unaccountable reason overlooked. Others suggest that it is only another excuse Hamlet makes to himself for further procrastination, and is intended to deceive no one but himself. Richardson suggests that he merely offers this motive as "one better suited to the opinions of the multitude," and that he was withheld "by the scruples, and perhaps weakness, of extreme sensibility."<sup>1</sup> But none of these seem adequate explanations, for they are too conjectural, and have too little basis in the play itself.

The words of the play leave it by no means certain

<sup>1</sup> *Essays on Some of Shakespeare's Dramatic Characters*, 5th edition, 1798, p. 183.

that Hamlet wants to see the king consigned to eternal damnation for the murder. It needs to be recalled that in the teachings of the church and in the popular thought hell was but the place of the dead, and might mean either perdition or purgatory. It is more than likely, therefore, that Hamlet desired only that the king's soul might go to purgatory and not to heaven. He wanted him not to go to perdition, but to the place of purification, for he was altogether unfit for heaven. This conception is borne out by the German play, where "hell" undoubtedly means only purgatory. Hamlet there says when he kills the king: "But this tyrant, I hope he may wash off his black sins in hell."<sup>1</sup> It may be an expression of the same idea in Marlowe's *Faustus*, where Benvolio says as he stabs Faustus: "Hell take thy soul."<sup>2</sup>

There is a further reason for Hamlet's self-restraint. It is likely that Hamlet regarded the king's prayer as giving him the right of "sanctuary," which Hamlet as a pious man would not violate. The stage directions in Shakespeare are very meagre, and say only that the king "Retires and kneels." There is no reference to any altar or chapel, as if the king had entered the temple to pray. But the German play has fuller stage directions, and under Act III., Scene I., in which the account of this incident is given, there are the directions: "Here is presented an Altar in a Temple." At the close of his self-accusation the directions are: "The King kneels before the altar."<sup>3</sup>

Here, then, is probably the true explanation. Hamlet does not want to violate the sanctuary in killing the

<sup>1</sup> Eng. trans. in Furness, II, p. 142.

<sup>2</sup> Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*, Temple edition, Scene XIII, 41.

<sup>3</sup> Eng. trans. in Furness, II, p. 132.

king, and thus bring sin upon himself. And he does not want the king to go straight to heaven, as he might if killed at his prayers. Hamlet wants to make sure that he will go to purgatory, where he will be punished for his crime, but where also, as the German play says, "he may wash off his black sins in hell."

This desire not to desecrate the holy altar is in perfect keeping with the moral and pious spirit of Hamlet. To revenge his father's murder is a filial duty to which he is ready to sacrifice his own life. But he is not to taint his own mind by doing a greater wrong. He will, therefore, not commit an impiety even in the discharge of so solemn a duty.

In contrast with this nobleness, however, stand the king and Laertes. When the king has incited Laertes against Hamlet, he feels so vengeful that he says he is even ready "To cut his throat i' the church." The king instantly agrees with this infamy, by saying:

"No place indeed should murder sanctuarize;  
Revenge should have no bounds."

(IV. vii. 128-9.)

### *Hamlet and His Mother.*

Before sending Hamlet to England one more attempt is made to solve the mystery of his strange behavior. He is now recognized as a troublesome and dangerous character, and the king sees in him a direct challenge to his own position. With the failure of the king and his spies to bring Hamlet to time, Polonius arranges that he shall be interviewed by his mother. The old steward tells the queen to use her influence with him, and advises her to "lay home to him," and to "Tell him his pranks have been too broad to bear with." (III. iv. 1-2.)

From the beginning, however, it is the queen who is interviewed by Hamlet. His finer moral sense has been shocked by his mother's conduct, and he takes her to task with as much severity as becomes a son. In his remonstrance against her marriage with the king he "speaks daggers but uses none." His powerful spirit upbraids and convicts her of her sins, and she tries to escape from him. But his strong will compels her to listen, and he says:

X

"Come, come, and sit you down; you shall not budge;  
You go not till I set you up a glass  
Where you may see the inmost part of you."

(III. iv. 18-20)

In the heat of the conference he discovers some one eavesdropping, and thinking it the king, makes a pass through the arras, only to find he has killed old Polonius. The old man has at last suffered the penalty of his intrigue and of his devotion to the king's nefarious schemes. It was no part of Hamlet's plan, however, and he afterwards grieved bitterly at the fatal mistake of his impetuosity. But the provocation was very great, and for the moment his hand got the better of his judgment. It would have been equally a mistake, however, had it been as he thought the king. The time was not yet ripe for the execution of the king, as he had not yet secured the objective evidence. But he was morally certain of the king's guilt and could not stay his hand.

During his interview with his mother the ghost appears to Hamlet for the last time. He has been delaying, and, it seems to the ghost, neglecting his task of revenge. He comes, therefore, as he says, "to whet thy almost blunted purpose." Though tardy, Hamlet has not forgotten his duty. He has only held back

for the time to be ripe, and to gain the necessary evidence. He has been trying to obey all the injunctions of the ghost, and has been endeavoring to carry out the revenge without tainting his own mind or harming his mother. There is now some evidence that his mother's interests and his consideration for her have done much to restrain him.

The ghost is manifestly invisible to the queen, and she regards Hamlet as mad when he addresses the apparition. She sees him bend his "eye on vacancy," and thinks him in some grave distemper. Bewildered to see him looking into what is to her only empty space, and yet apparently seeing some object, she asks him, "Whereon do you look?" and Hamlet replies, "On him, on him." Looking upon the pitiful ghost of his father deeply stirs the spirit of Hamlet, and makes him equal to the great revenge. But turning once more to his mother he finds her looking piteously on him instead of the ghost, and apparently thinking him distracted. The sight of the distressed look of his mother, and the thought of the ghost's command not to harm her, once more take from him his strong resolve, and he feels more like weeping for his mother than revenging his father. His love for his mother and his desire to save her take the sternness out of his resolve, and he is more disposed to shed tears than blood. He, therefore, begs her:

"Do not look upon me,  
Lest with this piteous action you convert  
My stern effects; then what I have to do  
Will want true color! tears perchance for blood."<sup>1</sup>  
(III. iv. 127-130.)

It is important, therefore, to notice that Hamlet's love for his mother and concern for her honor, together with

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Note C, pp. 295-8, *infra*.

the injunction of the ghost, acted as a great restraint upon his pursuit of revenge. There was great danger that in striking the king he should also strike his mother. And his hand was therefore stayed till he could find an opportunity to strike without harming her.

In respect to his mother, Hamlet's desire was that she should cut herself loose from the king. His moral nature is shown in his desire to have her quit the dishonorable relationship with the king, and live a virtuous life. The whole purport of his interview with her was to rouse her to a recognition of the immorality of her present life. The visit of the ghost offers the occasion for speaking even more plainly to her, and he beseeches her:



“Confess yourself to heaven;  
Repent what's past, avoid what is to come.”  
(III. iv. 149-150.)

But the queen was obdurate. She could be made to see “black and grained spots” upon her soul, but she would not relinquish her evil life. Hamlet's words might cleave her heart in twain, but she would not take his advice to

“throw away the worser part of it,  
And live the purer with the other half.”  
(III. iv. 157-8.)

All he could do, then, was to warn his mother, on peril of breaking her own neck, not to tell the king that he is only “mad in craft.”

Then he recalls to her that he is to be sent to England, in charge of his old school-fellows, Rosencrantz

and Guildenstern, and he ventures the prophecy that these false friends will be "hoist by their own petar." Hamlet seems fully aware of his own superior ability of mind, and believes that even with adverse circumstances he can still manage to turn the course of events to his own advantage. It is only by the rapid combination of untoward conditions after the killing of Polonius that he is finally overthrown, though even then he wins the moral victory.

Though Hamlet has not been able to persuade his mother to give up her sinful life, she, nevertheless, retains her love for her son. A side glimpse of her is given in the next scene in which she displays considerable excellence of character, and love for Hamlet. The king finds her where Hamlet had just left her after the interview, and he asks, "Where is your son?" She is obliged to make known the death of Polonius, but she tries to shield Hamlet from her husband by urging that he is "mad as the sea and wind," and that he had killed Polonius by mistaking him for a rat behind the arras. Guarding the secret of his feigned madness, she further pleads for him by saying that now "He weeps for what is done." (IV. i. 27.) Her evasions, however, do not save her son from the ever-deepening suspicions of the king, who now calls him "dangerous," and finds a better excuse to banish him.

#### *Hamlet's Banishment.*

Very gladly would the king dispatch Hamlet by less subtle means than he had used to dispatch his father. But Hamlet's great popularity forbids the king attempting any outer violence. He is forced to acknowledge that the people love Hamlet, though the thought is very distasteful to him:

“Yet must not we put the strong law on him;  
 He’s loved of the distracted multitude,  
 Who like not in their judgment, but their eyes.”  
 (IV. iii. 3-5.)

The king now sees that something desperate must be done with Hamlet or he will fall victim to him. It is very apparent that he at any rate does not labor under the idea that Hamlet is incapable of action. He is, on the contrary, so fearful of his ability to act and to act quickly, that he prepares to send him to England at once. He makes the excuse that it is for Hamlet’s own safety, and announces to him:

‘Hamlet, this deed, for thine especial safety,  
 . . . . . must send thee hence  
 With fiery quickness.’  
 (IV. iii. 39-42.)

Hamlet is, therefore, sent at once to England, then a tributary country to Denmark. Claudius gives orders to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern not to wait till the next day, but to take him at once: “Delay it not; I’ll have him hence to-night.” (IV. iii. 54.) The king likewise sends orders for the death of Hamlet, and he thinks that the recollection of recent chastisement by Denmark will induce the king of England to execute his orders. Claudius is now thoroughly alarmed at the possible danger from Hamlet, and therefore orders the king of England to put him to immediate death:

“Do it, England;  
 For like the hectic in my blood he rages,  
 And thou must cure me; till I know ‘tis done,  
 Howe’er my haps, my joys were ne’er begun.”  
 (IV. iii. 64-67.)

### *Fortinbras Once More.*

Just before the embarkation, the presence of Fortinbras hovers once more over the stage, apparently as a

temptation and suggestion to Hamlet. On this occasion he is using his license from Claudius to march across Denmark on his way to Poland. He had sent this message to Claudius, by one of his captains:

“Go, captain, from me greet the Danish king;  
Tell him that by his license Fortinbras  
Claims the conveyance of a promised march  
Over his kingdom.”

(IV. iv. 1-4.)

The king had succeeded in warding off the imminent attack of Fortinbras upon Denmark at the opening of the play by a direct, but humiliating, appeal to the old uncle of the prince. At that time the ambassadors from Claudius to the old king of Norway brought back the very welcome word that Fortinbras had been restrained from his intended revolt and invasion of Denmark. The interpretation of the matter offered by Horatio in the first scene of the play was confirmed by the report of the ambassadors. The old king had been led to believe that Fortinbras intended his army for a campaign “against the Polack,” but was grieved to find that it was really against Denmark. Wherefore, he had suppressed his nephew’s levies, and rebuked the young man, who now

“Makes vow before his uncle never more  
To give the assay of arms against your majesty.”

(II. ii. 70-1.)

At this the king of Norway was much pleased, and gave Fortinbras

“commission to employ those soldiers,  
So levied as before, against the Polack;”

(II. ii. 74-5.)

and requests Claudius,

"That it might please you to give quiet pass  
Through your dominions for this enterprise."  
(II. ii. 77-8.)

Fortinbras, therefore, in prosecuting his march through Danish territory against the Polack is only availing himself of a privilege previously granted by Claudius.

The juncture of Fortinbras's march across Denmark with Hamlet's banishment to England was no doubt intended by the dramatist as an opportunity for Hamlet, had he been so minded. It is very likely that had Hamlet seized the occasion he could have enlisted Fortinbras in a common attack on Claudius. The ease with which Laertes later raised a rebellion against the king would suggest that one with Hamlet's popularity and the prestige of his princely character could very readily have raised an army to join with Fortinbras. Hamlet could well afford to promise Fortinbras the return of his forfeited lands when they had jointly deposed Claudius. But all this temptation Hamlet steadfastly resists.

Instead of making common cause with Fortinbras, Hamlet steadfastly maintains his way of peace. The readiness of Fortinbras for war stands in very striking contrast to the peaceable ways of Hamlet, and is doubtless intended by the dramatist to bring out Hamlet's character. Shakespeare was a hater of war and a lover of peace, and he therefore portrays in his greatest character the heroism of peace. But the coming of Fortinbras was surely meant as Hamlet's temptation. He declines, however, to bring about a civil war, that would mean the sacrifice of many innocent persons and the rending of the kingdom, though he does not set

his own life at a pin's fee. Hamlet, however, only takes the coming as an inspiration to follow up more earnestly his own appointed task of revenging his father's murder. If Fortinbras, for so trifling a cause, and with so little provocation, could lead an army to Poland, surely he in his own great and just cause, should be more active:

"Oh, from this time forth,  
My thoughts be bloody, or be nothing worth!"  
(IV. iv. 65-6.)

His cause, however, is peace, not war, and he must revenge the murder and put in joint the broken times without doing more harm than he is charged to remedy. His task is to save his people, not to destroy them.

### *Laertes and the King.*

Upon his return from Paris, Laertes learns of the death of his father, and charging it against the king, raises a small revolt against him, and enters his presence to work his revenge. He has succeeded in gathering a considerable following and they evince their faith in him by asking that he be made king. The attendant reports to Claudius that the people cry:

"Laertes shall be king!"  
Caps, hands, and tongues applaud it to the clouds,  
'Laertes shall be king, Laertes king!'"  
(IV. v. 102-4.)

The king has some trouble in pacifying him, and explains that it was not he that had killed his father, saying, "I am guiltless of your father's death." Laertes is finally pacified by the king's avowal of his innocence, and by his suggestion to arbitrate their differences.

Before Laertes can fully adjust his suspicions of the king, he is all but distracted at seeing his sister enter, singing incoherent songs in her madness, and not even recognizing him. The sorrow of Ophelia's disappointment has borne very heavily upon her, and her mind has become distracted. The poor, weak, innocent girl, in trying to be a dutiful daughter had become an untrustworthy lover, and now she is out of her mind. Hamlet's behavior toward her was doubtless severe, but anything else would have been unjust. Though disappointed and distracted, her suffering is lessened by the thought that it is her lover who is "Like sweet bells jangled out of tune and harsh."

### *Hamlet and Laertes.*

Meanwhile Horatio has had a letter, and the king a note, from Hamlet, saying that he has returned to Denmark. It is only in the last act of the play, however, that we learn the whole story, when Hamlet finds time and occasion to narrate it carefully to Horatio. It seems that the ship conveying him to England was attacked by pirates, and that in the fight he boarded them, and later induced them to set him ashore in Denmark, leaving Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to continue their voyage to England. He expects that the report of what happened to them will soon reach Denmark and cause him further trouble with the king; and he therefore feels the necessity of great haste if he is to forestall the king and carry out his plans.

With the return of Hamlet to Denmark, Laertes soon learns that it was Hamlet and not the king who had killed his father. The king eagerly seizes the opportunity to transfer the quarrel to Hamlet, and very skillfully arranges a duel between the two to settle their

grievances. If it be the duty of Hamlet to avenge the death of his father, it is scarcely less the duty of Laertes to avenge the death of Polonius. The king whets the wrath of Laertes by telling him that Hamlet is very dangerous, for

"he which hath your noble father slain  
Pursued my life."

(IV. vii. 4-5.)

This incenses Laertes the more, and makes him very willing to attack Hamlet. He accepts with eagerness the king's suggestion of a duel with Hamlet, and like his father he is not unwilling to use foul means. The entire Polonius family seem not to be above treachery and deceit.

VI

*Hamlet's Return.*

Hamlet's return at the time of Laertes's little revolt leaves the impression that Denmark was now ripe for a rebellion. If we are to take the words of the king, no one in the kingdom was so well beloved as Hamlet, and hence no one so likely to be successful in rebellion. But casting aside this temptation, he presents himself first in the churchyard, where he discourses wisdom to Horatio and the grave-diggers. Possibly he went there to mourn over his father's grave, and to sorrow over that of Polonius, for he is in the vicinity of the latter when the burial party arrives. Hamlet is shocked to find himself present at the funeral of "the fair Ophelia," and to notice that they are burying her with "maimed rites," because, as he hears the priest say, "Her death was doubtful." These things had been told him by the grave-digger, but he had not suspected they

referred to Ophelia. When the body is lowered into the grave, Laertes in the ecstasy of his grief leaps in to express his lasting love for his sister. Then Hamlet, feeling that his love for her is greater than that of forty thousand brothers, also leaps into the grave to show his affection. Laertes, however, has been incensed against Hamlet by the king, and, not taking his act as friendly, grapples with him. The quick passion of the prince responds, and the two have to be separated by attendants. For this impetuosity Hamlet suffered deeply, as he afterwards explains to Horatio, saying:

"I am very sorry, good Horatio,  
That to Laertes I forgot myself; . . .  
But, sure, the bravery of his grief did put me  
Into a towering passion."

(V. ii. 75-80.)

He evidently bore no ill-will to Laertes, and still loved Ophelia. But the incident shows his tremendous capabilities of instant action, and goes to disprove any theory that assumes in him any weakness, mental or volitional.

#### *The Duel—Hamlet and Laertes.*

When they met for the duel, Hamlet made haste to assure Laertes of his love and good-will by offering ample apology for his impetuosity at the grave of Ophelia. His first words were an apology, probably not only for his behavior at Ophelia's grave, but also for his part in her death and in that of Polonius:

"Give me your pardon, sir; I've done you wrong;  
But pardon't, as you are a gentleman."

(V. ii. 213-4.)

Then he explains that he was suffering from much distraction, and that if he had wronged Laertes he could

not have been in his proper senses, and disclaims any purposed evil. He then begs him in the most cordial manner to

“Free me so far in your most generous thoughts,  
That I have shot mine arrow o'er the house,  
And hurt my brother.”

(V. ii. 229-231.)

Laertes, however, refuses all reconciliation, and the incident but adds fuel to his burning wrath. He has been so misled and incited by the king whose perfidy had suggested the duel that he will accept no explanation. He gives further evidence of baseness and treachery in his willingness to accept the king's suggestion of poisoning his sword. (IV. vii. 135-140.) But the fates are against Hamlet. His “towering passion,” growing out of the very intensity of his purpose, has twice led him into mistakes, and both times with the Polonius family,—first with the father, and next with the son.

Though morally justified in both cases, Hamlet scarcely excused himself, for he had no will to perform the part of the “scourge and minister” of heaven. Hamlet, however, does not have to wait long for his vindication. When in the duel both contestants are mortally wounded by the poisoned rapiers, Laertes at once admits his guilt, and cries out: “I am justly kill'd with mine own treachery.” (V. ii. 294.) Then, with his dying breath he reveals the king's part in the treacherous deed, and begs piteously,

“Exchange forgiveness with me, noble Hamlet.”  
(V. ii. 316.)

In these last words he bears full testimony to the purity and unselfishness of Hamlet's life, and absolves him from all blame:

*lets some love.*

"Mine and my father's death come not upon thee,  
Nor thine on me!"

(V. ii. 317-8.)

### *The Unmasking of the King.*

It was only in the duel that the wicked and perfidious character of the king was revealed, and his diabolical schemes fully unmasked. Laertes was the first after Hamlet and Horatio to recognize the real character of Claudius. As soon as he is wounded by Hamlet with his own exchanged rapier, there is at once disclosed before him the entire course of events. At first he blames himself for his part, and for his treachery, saying that he has only been caught in his own trap, and that he is "justly kill'd." Then as soon as it is apparent by the death of the queen from drinking the wine, he is doubly sure of the king's guilt for the whole affair, and says boldly, "the king's to blame." When the king dies, Laertes realizes it as a just punishment and says:

"He is justly served;  
It is a poison temper'd by himself."  
(V. ii. 314-5.)

The cry of treason raised by the attendants when Hamlet stabs the king is at once silenced by the words of Laertes justifying Hamlet's course. Not another word is uttered in the remainder of the play in the king's behalf. It took only a word from Laertes to unmask the character of Claudius, and to put his attendants and followers to complete silence. There seems to be no one left who has a good word to say on his behalf, and the treachery and perfidy of his life are fully accepted.

Nevertheless, there has been revealed no objective proof of the king's guilt for the murder of his brother.

Hamlet has long been convinced of the truth of the ghost's words, though he has not secured any evidence except that from the ghost and from the undoubted certainty of the moral baseness of Claudius as revealed chiefly in his arrangement and management of the duel with Laertes. The cups of poisoned wine, intended for Hamlet, one of which caused the death of the queen, were evidence enough of his unscrupulous nature. His corrupt and immoral character was proven beyond any doubt, though with his death he carried away all traces of the objective evidence that Hamlet had wanted for the murder of his father. The death that seized him was accepted as a just retribution for his crimes, and for the baseness of his character, and he died under the unanimous condemnation of all the persons of the drama.

*Hamlet's Purposes—Horatio.*

*love*

The life task of Hamlet, imposed on him by the ghost, is fulfilled even in his death. The death of the king leaves him with only one dying wish, that his purposes may be explained to the people, lest he should be left with

“a wounded name,  
Things standing thus unknown.”  
(V. ii. 331-2.)

This dying request, then, he leaves with his one tried and true friend, Horatio, begging him to show the people the reason of his conduct:

“report me and my cause aright  
To the unsatisfied.”  
(V. ii. 326-7.)

Horatio, however, is unwilling to live after Hamlet has died, and, saying he is more like an antique Roman

than a Dane, he tries to drink the poisoned wine. His friendship for Hamlet is so strong that he wants to die with him. But Hamlet seizes the cup, and restrains him, begging him to live and devote his life to a vindication of Hamlet's course. With the earnestness born of a conviction that his cause was just, and his devotion to his task unselfish, he beseeches Horatio:

"If thou didst ever hold me in thy heart,  
Absent thee from felicity awhile,  
And in this harsh world draw thy breath in pain,  
To tell my story."

(V. ii. 333-6.)

The friendship of Hamlet and Horatio is one of the finest in literature. Without fully understanding his plans until afterward, Horatio trusted Hamlet and was true to him. He seemed to understand him when no one else did. He was his true friend in life and in death, and after he is gone he speaks on behalf of his fair name. Horatio had the fine moral character to appreciate the noble purposes and splendid life of Hamlet, devoted as it was to his filial and patriotic duty, and whose life purposes needed only to be known to be approved. Horatio accepts the task of reporting him aright, and disclosing the secrets that could only be revealed after his death. As Hamlet breathes his last, he corroborates his words, and bears eloquent testimony to the uprightness and nobility of his friend:

"Now cracks a noble heart.—Good night, sweet prince,  
And flights of angels sing thee to thy rest!"

(V. ii. 346-7.)

#### *Fortinbras as Next King.*

Hamlet lived and died solely for Denmark. He did not regard his own life, but always thought of the

good of his country. As he is pleading with Horatio to explain his cause to the people, the announcement is made of the approach of young Fortinbras on his return from Poland. Once more, then, and as the last actor in the drama, this young warrior is brought upon the stage. He is very different in character from his cousin Hamlet, and is the type of self-regarding ambition, who is willing to make war and lose thousands of men in order to gain territory that adds to him nothing but a name. He is not, however, of the criminal type of Claudius, but possesses many barbaric virtues. As a cousin of Hamlet's, though much less excellent, he is now the nearest to the throne and recognizes some rights in the kingdom.

With his dying words, then, Hamlet speaks on behalf of Fortinbras. Apparently he wants the succession settled that the country may go forward in peace. In order to secure this, then, he gives his voice for the election, saying, "I do prophesy the election lights On Fortinbras." (V. ii. 342-3.) On his part Fortinbras accepts the advantage his kinship and the voice of Hamlet give him, saying, "with sorrow I embrace my fortune." Horatio, sharing in the peaceable spirit of Hamlet, and fearing a possible disturbance, urges the immediate accession, "lest more mischance, On plots and errors happen." Fortinbras then accepts the kingdom, and closes the play by pronouncing a brief but noble panegyric over the body of Hamlet:

"Let four captains  
Bear Hamlet, like a soldier, to the stage;  
For he was likely, had he been put on,  
To have proved most royally; and, for his passage,  
The soldiers' music and the rites of war  
Speak loudly for him.—"

(V. ii. 382-7.)

*Hamlet, a Deliverer.*

The success that has attended Hamlet's efforts proves him to be a deliverer of his country, as in the earlier versions of *Saxo* and *Belleforest*. He has rid his country of the corruption and criminality of Claudius without instigating a civil war, or causing the death of any innocent person but himself. He has refrained from the course of the vindictive Laertes of stirring up an internal insurrection, and has sacrificed only himself to his country's welfare. The country has not been put into such turmoil and revolution as to invite an attack from the ambitious Fortinbras. The crown of Denmark has passed peaceably to his royal kinsman, Fortinbras, and Denmark goes on toward her national destiny.

Hamlet has triumphed, therefore, even in his death. He has revenged the murder of his father, but several other persons have also lost their lives. This he very much regretted, for he tried to strike only the king. He has, however, accomplished his task without causing war, and has discharged his duty both to his parent and to his country. All his plans have been realized, except his indifferent desire to become king, which he readily sacrificed to his larger duty. If any justification of his course of conduct is necessary, this will be undertaken by Horatio. Knowing Hamlet's concern for his good name, Horatio says he will

"speak to the yet unknowing world  
How these things came about; so shall you hear  
Of carnal, bloody, and unnatural acts,  
Of accidental judgments, casual slayings,  
Of deaths put on by cunning, and forced cause,

And, in this upshot, purposes mistook  
Fall'n on the inventors' heads. All this can I  
Truly deliver."

(V. ii. 366-373.)

The death of Hamlet marks the extinction of the direct royal line of Denmark. Ulrici suggests that this is due to the wrong done by them as a line. Rather is it due solely to the crimes of Claudius, and but for Hamlet the punishment would have fallen also on the state. By his devotion he saved the state from being wrecked by his uncle's crimes, but in the very nature of things he could not save either himself or the wrong-doer. The over-ruling Providence, that is felt everywhere in the play, is manifest not in the extinction of the line of kings, but in the deliverance from one great wrong-doer, and in the continuance of the state in peace, though in the hands of another but related king.

### *The Character of Hamlet.*

There is practical unanimity among students of the play that Hamlet is the most intellectual character in the entire Shakespearean drama. Of the play Rapp has said that "Of all the poet's works, and indeed of all works in the world, *Hamlet* appears to me to be the richest in thought and the profoundest."<sup>1</sup> Stedefeld says of the prince that he is "an intellectual hero, a Titan, who is far above his whole surroundings, rising thus above them by insight, learning, culture, wisdom, and knowledge of men and the world."<sup>2</sup> No other character brings such a wealth of intellect, such a well-trained mind, such profundity of thought to the solu-



<sup>1</sup> Eng. trans. in Furness, II., p. 295.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 343.

tion of the problem which the course of life and of the world present to him. He is in every way a deep scholar and a philosopher; and the unschooled Shakespeare shows his abiding respect for learning in making this scholar from Wittenberg the brightest mind among all the brilliant wits of his stage.

The persons of the drama and the readers of the play unite in proclaiming Hamlet also a most noble character. The difficulties that appear in the interpretation of the play are intellectual, not moral. There is difficulty in understanding the problem presented to his mind, but there is practical agreement on the excellence of his character. Critics have vied with one another to praise his noble personality. Goethe calls him "a beautiful, pure, and most moral nature." Campbell speaks of him as "so ideal, and yet so real an existence." Stedefeld says, "Hamlet is, according to the intention of the poet, in his whole bearing a noble, manly, chivalrous presence, with moral and religious feeling." Professor Dowden says that "One of the deepest characteristics of Hamlet's nature is a longing for sincerity, for truth in mind and manners, an aversion for all that is false, affected, or exaggerated." For this reason the play is sometimes spoken of as "a tragedy of moral idealism." But it is a tragedy that is at the same time a triumph.

Hamlet is distinguished among the characters of Shakespeare as the one pre-eminent for taking always the moral point of view. To all the other characters of the play he appears as a sort of moral-sense. Looking into his noble countenance they all became conscious of their wrong-doings. The king is convicted of his crimes by the very presence of Hamlet. Polonius sees himself as a crafty trickster and moral idiot. The

queen is conscience-stricken when her son speaks to her and exclaims:

 "Thou turn'st mine eyes into my very soul,  
And there I see such black and grained spots  
As will not leave their tinct."

(III. iv. 89-81.)

There are no persons of the drama but realize his excellence, and in his presence are conscious of his goodness. It is he that brings the king to confess in his soliloquy the blackness of his deed, though he stifles his conscience, and does not declare his crime. And at the close of the play, all who survive unite in praise of his nobility.

Justice cannot be done to Hamlet without the mention of his religious spirit. The very fact that he has an apparition of his father's spirit reveals a belief in another world. Hamlet is an idealist, and explains every thing to himself in terms of spirit. It is by a visitation of a spirit from the other world that he gets his life task, according to which he governs all his conduct. And he is not the fatalist Professor Bradley thinks he is, for his life is not the self-abandonment that appears in his theory. He is quite capable of taking "arms against a sea of troubles," and still thinks that Providence over-rules our plans for the larger good. It was after he had exerted himself most strenuously in the direction of his own affairs and had turned his banishment to England against his persecutors, that he says,

 "There's a divinity that shapes our ends,  
Rough-hew them how we will."  
(V. ii. 10-11.)

Hamlet lived his entire life in this moral and religious spirit. All the qualities he admired and sought

were qualities of mind and soul. He did not care for place or distinction, and would not allow his companions to call themselves his servants, but insisted on calling them friends. He hated shams and pretences, and loved sincerity and honesty of character. He had no false notions of royal dignity, and did not hesitate to love the daughter of the royal steward. He did not care for position, and had no laments for himself that he did not attain to the crown. He revered only moral and spiritual qualities in men, and worshipped God as the father of his spirit. He made the best of this life, and believed there was a better one to come. No character in all Shakespeare is so much an idealist. In the sordid conditions of his times, he lived entirely in the ideal world, and at the last sacrificed his life to gain an ideal end. He is at once the most intellectual, the most moral, the most truly religious, and at the same time the most heroic character in Shakespeare.

### *Hamlet, an Ideal Prince.*

There can be little doubt that Shakespeare intended Hamlet to embody his ideal of the noble and patriotic prince. He had previously depicted from English history all sorts of princes and kings, and had found a noble prince in Henry the Fifth. Both Hamlet and Henry are distinguished by their lofty and intelligent patriotism, though Hamlet is much the finer and nobler character. Henry was conscientious, but not so self-sacrificing. He was noble, but not distinguished by great intelligence. He lacked Hamlet's intensity of moral conviction and his profundity of thought. The dramatist could find his perfect ideal only in a legendary character, where his own imagination could work

upon his hero. This he might have found in Arthur, but he preferred to take a story already dramatized and picked out Hamlet, Prince of Denmark.

In the English historical plays he had just written the dramatist found in all, with one exception, the stories of base ambition and vulgar lust for power. He had just concluded his studies of the long and bloody struggle between Lancaster and York, culminating in the brutal reign of Richard the Third, his one ideal villain. With the exception of Henry the Fifth these rulers were ever ready at any time to plunge their country into war, and to keep it struggling for generations in the hope of realizing their own personal ambitions. They had never considered their country, but were always ready for civil war or foreign war if there was any chance to achieve their own glory.

But Hamlet is a prince of another sort. As in *Saxo* and *Belleforest*, and as well in the German play, his chief thought was for his country. He would rather endure the ills he had than involve his country in bloody civil strife, or invite the armed intervention of a foreign prince. Though his uncle Claudius was a corrupt and demoralizing influence in the state, Hamlet seemed to think it would only make matters worse to try to dethrone him by armed force. He therefore seeks other means of accomplishing his moral task, and trusts to the moral character of fate to find a way to avenge his father and deliver his country. His moral faith did not in the end miscarry, and he lived to see the murderer and tyrant punished and his own course vindicated. As a true patriot he did not count his own life at a pin's fee when the moral fate of his country was at stake. He was satisfied to see the

crown pass peaceably to the head of one no less worthy than his kinsman Fortinbras of Norway. Under him the two rival nations could unite, and peace would be maintained.

THE MERCHANT OF VENICE:  
OR SHAKESPEARE'S CHRISTIAN AND JEW



## CHAPTER III

### THE MERCHANT OF VENICE: OR SHAKESPEARE'S CHRISTIAN AND JEW

#### I

**I**T is becoming quite obvious to students that we have been in danger of losing Shakespeare as an Elizabethan dramatist, and have not entirely succeeded in making him a modern dramatist. There can be no doubt that succeeding ages have developed meanings for many of the plays that would have been inconceivable for an Elizabethan dramatist and unacceptable to an Elizabethan audience. The interest of the theatre has tended to make them into modern plays, and scholarship has been unable to interpret them for us as Elizabethan. But one benefit of the Shakespeare revival and of modern scholarship has doubtless been a more adequate conception of Elizabethan conditions, and hence a better understanding of Shakespeare as a dramatist of his own age. Shakespeare no doubt addressed himself to his own times and presented a message to his contemporaries, but that message has in many cases been lost to our age. To rediscover that message and to determine its value for us is a worthy task for modern scholarship.

No play, perhaps, more than *The Merchant of Venice* has been subject to this modernizing spirit, for its dramatic excellence has kept it almost continu-

ously on the stage. Though a valuable play in its modern form, it is important that we should not lose its original significance. In its present rendering the play has ceased almost completely to be a story of Antonio, the Merchant of Venice, and has become the story of Shylock, the Jew of Venice, and the misfortunes that befell him. "In this way," as Mr. Poel has said, Shylock "becomes tragic, and, contrary to the dramatist's intention, is made the leading part."<sup>1</sup> The play is, then, sadly in need of a new study, and of a reconstruction in the light of what we now know of the Elizabethan mind and conditions.

The criticism of the play has from the first revolved about the person and character of Shylock, and has in large measure been determined by the attitude of each age toward the Jews. Racial and religious prejudices have taken the place of candid study of the play, and Shakespeare has become to one generation a Jew-baiter and to the next a Jew-apologist. For the first two centuries after Shakespeare, Shylock was universally condemned and execrated, and the play was considered a keen arraignment of the character and practices of the Jewish race. With the lapse of time, however, and with a more enlightened opinion of the Jews, people began to see in the play a great plea for the persecuted Jew, and a condemnation of Christian prejudice and malice. Christians now have come to sympathize with Shylock, and Jews repudiate him as a representative of their race. These two types of interpretation now exist side by side, and no one can assure us of the real meaning of the play. May it not be, therefore, that there is truth in both views, and that the present task of the

<sup>1</sup> *Shakespeare in the Theatre*, by W. Poel, p. 70. London, 1913.

critic is to extract that truth, and to assign to each view its value and its limitations?

## II

There can be little doubt that to Elizabethan audiences generally Shylock was an object of condemnation and execration. It was the fashion of the times to despise the Jews, and to hold them up to scorn, as Marlowe did in *The Jew of Malta*. Audiences were filled with prejudices against them, and greatly enjoyed the spectacle of a Jew abused on the stage. It is pretty generally admitted now by scholars that Jews on the stage were looked upon as comic personages, and that they would be greeted with laughter and scorn.<sup>1</sup> The element of tragedy in such plays seems to have escaped the audiences entirely.

Shakespeare's play, therefore, at once suggests itself to us as an attempt to better and perhaps to correct the interpretation of Jewish character presented by Marlowe in his play. Marlowe at this time was Shakespeare's greatest dramatic rival, though he had died probably four or five years before Shakespeare produced *The Merchant of Venice*. His work, however, had surpassed that of all other dramatists, and now Shakespeare was challenging his supremacy. Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice*, then, was sure to invite comparison with Marlowe's *Jew of Malta*, and with the interpretation of Jewish character there presented.

At this time the law did not permit Jews to reside in England, though a few of them were actually there.

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Brandes, *William Shakespeare*, English trans., p. 164, London, 1902.

It might be supposed, therefore, that neither of the dramatists really had a chance to understand the Jewish character, and that whatever they had to say would be largely a matter of hearsay and prejudice. The Jews of the present day certainly resent having Shylock regarded as a typical Jew, and insist that he is but a caricature of the real Jew. However it may be in the matter of individual character, there is less reason to resent Shakespeare's interpretation of the Jewish system of thought, as seen in Shylock.

Some recent writers have felt convinced that Shakespeare fully shared with his audience this prejudice against the Jews, and that in his play he meant to ridicule and execrate Shylock. These convictions have been voiced by Professor Stoll in a recent paper in which he sums up the matter in these words: "By all the devices of Shakespeare's dramaturgy, then, Shylock is proclaimed, as by the triple repetition of a crier, to be the villain, a comic villain, though, or butt. . . . A miser, a money-lender, a Jew,—all these three had from time immemorial been objects of popular detestation and ridicule, whether in life or on the stage."<sup>1</sup>

There is no doubt that this is the light in which Shakespeare makes Shylock appear to the other persons of the drama, particularly to Antonio and his friends. But how far this reflects the prejudices of the age, and how far the dramatist himself shared in these prejudices must be sought outside the matter of the play. On the strength of the play alone Shakespeare cannot be charged with the blind and passionate bigotry all but universal in his day. He really had

<sup>1</sup> "Shylock," article in *Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, X. 2. 1911, p. 244.

no share in this Jewish hatred, and rose far above the common level of such vulgar prejudice. A comparison of his Shylock with Marlowe's Barabas, or with any other Jew of the earlier drama, reveals an absence of any bigotry, and discloses a new and better attitude toward the Jews. All critics have noticed that his Jew is a man and not a monster, a human being and not a fiend. His play may be in some measure a protest against such caricatures of the Jews.

During the two centuries following Shakespeare the same racial and religious antipathies continued, and are reflected in the attitude of the public and of the critics toward Shakespeare's play. It was all but universally thought that the dramatist was endeavoring merely to "hold the Jew up to detestation," glorying in the discomfiture of Shylock, and rejoicing in his enforced conversion to Christianity. It was conceded, however, that as usual Shakespeare took higher ground than that of the traditional Jew-baiter, and raised his victim quite above the current notion of Jewish depravity.

The beginning of an entirely new attitude toward the play may be noticed near the end of the eighteenth century. Reversing all former opinion, actors and critics began to think that instead of a Jew-baiter, Shakespeare was in reality a Jew-apologist. They maintained that he intended to portray in Shylock a great representative of his race, one who appeared as its advocate, avenger, and martyr, only bettering the Christian example, and exposing the shamelessness of the Christians by turning their practices upon themselves.

This view appears to have been set forth first in

the last decade of the eighteenth century. Furness says: "Chronologically, the earliest voice, as far as I know, which was raised in defence of Shylock and in denunciation of the illegality of his defeat is that of an Anonymous Contributor to a volume of *Essays by a Society of Gentlemen at Exeter*, printed in 1792. The Essay is called 'An Apology for the Character and Conduct of Shylock,' and is signed 'T. O.'" The Essayist admits that Shylock is cruel, but pleads that he was made so by ill-treatment, and goes on to deplore "the lax state of morality" that has always accepted the verdict of the unjust trial without an instance of censure or of unfavorable sentiment.<sup>1</sup>

Public sentiment began to turn in Shylock's favor, however, as Furness says, only "when Edmund Kean, in 1814, revealed a Jew almost more sinned against than sinning, and one who simply bettered the instruction of Christian example."<sup>2</sup> It appears further that "Campbell in 1833, was the first among Editors to maintain openly that Shylock was an ill-used man, with nothing unnatural in his character, and that he was overcome 'only by a legal quibble,'"<sup>3</sup> In the two centuries since Elizabeth, human sympathies had broadened, and as Brandes puts it, "In the humarer view of a later age Shylock appears as a half-pathetic creation, a scapegoat, a victim."<sup>4</sup>

The most recent advocate of this very modern view says that *The Merchant of Venice* is an "example of a masked design, of a subtly disguised purpose. There was one drama which jibed at the Jew—and defended him; one which exposed his inhumanity—

<sup>1</sup> Furness, *Variorum Merchant of Venice*, pp. 403-4.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 403.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 405.

<sup>4</sup> *William Shakespeare*, p. 164.

and his human feeling; one which revealed him as pitiless—and an object of pity; one which showed the iniquity he dealt out to others—and the iniquity dealt out to him.” This interpretation of the play makes it Shakespeare’s grand plea for tolerance, and “the most stupendous, the most remorseless satire . . . against the extremes and follies of his age.”<sup>1</sup>

While it may be admitted that this modern attitude displays a commendable advance in human sympathy, it cannot pass as an interpretation of the play. There is nothing convincing about any of these views that make the dramatist a preacher of tolerance or an advocate of any sect or creed. Nothing has appeared in any of the recent discussions of the play to make it necessary to differ from the opinion of Professor Ward, uttered now over a quarter of a century ago: “It is, I am convinced, only modern readers and modern actors who suppose that Shakespeare consciously intended to arouse the sympathy of his audience on behalf of the Jew.”<sup>2</sup>

These widely divergent views appear to be reflections of the spirit of the Elizabethan and Victorian ages respectively, rather than interpretations of the play itself. On the strength of the play it is not necessary to accuse Shakespeare of all the anti-Jewish prejudices of his age, such as were in evidence in the trial and condemnation of Dr. Lopez in 1594, only a few years before he wrote his play. Nor is it possible, on the strength of the play alone, to maintain that Shakespeare was an apologist of Shylock the Jew, and a satirist of Antonio the Christian. The dramatist no-

<sup>1</sup> J. Cuming Walters, “The Jew that Shakespeare Drew,” in *Shakespearean Addresses*, pp. 269-270, 274. London, 1912.

<sup>2</sup> *History of English Dramatic Literature*, I. 189. London, 1875.

where else has playcd the rôle of accuser or advocate of any special creed or religion or politics, or of any particular sect or race or party, and it is too much to ask us to admit it in connection with this play. No successful attempt has ever been made to enlist him in any school or church or party. He everywhere plays a much larger rôle than either accuser or defender, prosecutor or advocate. He seems to be above all such dissensions and divisions that separate men, like the Judge of all the earth,

"holding no form of creed,  
But contemplating all."

If Shakespeare is as great and original in power of thought as admittedly he is in dramatic skill, we must learn to interpret him not by his age, nor by our age, but by himself. So little do we know of his life, and so meagre are the accounts by his friends and contemporaries of what manner of man he was, that there is little certain reflection of his thought in anything but his written work. It is in his poems and plays alone that we can, at this day, find any evidence that Shakespeare unlocked either his heart or his mind. Our first duty, then, toward this play is to discard as far as we may our own opinions of Shylock as a man and a Jew, and of Antonio as a man and a Christian, and let the words of the play creep into our ears and see if the dramatist does not make harmony out of the many discordant notes of the various stories that he incorporated into this great drama.

### III

Hints, but only hints, of the dramatist's meaning may be derived from a study of the material with

which he worked, and of the process by which he constructed his play. His method of handling his material, and the result of his art in the finished drama, are the only sources of our knowledge of the mind of Shakespeare. Unfortunately, the old play mentioned by Gosson, which it is agreed by all is the most likely immediate source of Shakespeare's play, has been lost, but we possess all the other known earlier versions of the narratives that the dramatist may have used. We know enough, however, about the play mentioned by Gosson to make it clear that not one of all these earlier versions affords any real help for the interpretation of Shakespeare's play. The conviction is inevitable with all critics that none of these versions have the same theme or possess any of the great qualities of *The Merchant of Venice*. Gosson's reference to the lost play as "The Jew . . . representing the greediness of worldly chusers, and the bloody minds of Usurers" lets us see that already before Shakespeare worked upon this material the two stories of the Caskets and the Pound of Flesh had been combined into a single drama. Of direct importance, however, in our understanding of Shakespeare, the words of Gosson let us see that the old play was primarily the story of Shylock, and that in it the Jew was held up to execration after the manner of all plays and stories of the times dealing with Jewish characters. It may be concluded, therefore, that the old play did not contain anything of the wonderful, pulsating life, or depth of meaning to be found in Shakespeare's play.

All we know, then, of the older stories, or plays, leaves it clear that it was Shakespeare who changed it from the "Jew" to the "Merchant" of Venice, completely transforming its inner meaning. After Shake-

peare, as we know, Lansdowne once more changed it back into the "Jew" of Venice, thereby losing the great value of the work of Shakespeare. The change made by Shakespeare is significant of the alteration in the point of view and of the consequent meaning of the story. Shakespeare's play is no longer the narrative of a usurious and relentless Jew, but the story of the danger and subsequent escape of a Christian merchant from the clutches of a Jewish money-lender. It is therefore not primarily anti-Jewish, as were the old forms of the story, for the conflict of Christian and Jew issues only in connection with Bassanio's pursuit of love, which is the main story of the play. The old racial and religious quarrel, by being related to the love story, receives a new vital and moral significance. Its solution, moreover, affected as it is by Bassanio's success in love, is worked out on the plane of ordinary human and moral relationships.

Shakespeare everywhere has the habit of encasing great and elementary human passions in some of the quite ordinary affairs or transactions of life, thus exhibiting their essential relations to life and its tasks and problems. He has accordingly enclosed the conflict of Antonio and Shylock in the more usual but romantic story of Bassanio's love for Portia, and has made the latter both the occasion and the solution of the racial conflict. It is the conflict of the Christian and the Jew, however, that is the one all-absorbing topic of the play, and it is Shylock who is the one great commanding personality. Even Portia herself, though so much more excellent, and so charming as a woman, can scarcely rival Shylock in dramatic or in popular interest. It is Shylock's loan that makes possible the Caskets Scene; for Bassanio could not have

made the venture without his money. Shylock, too, is the center of the Trial Scene; for he is the plaintiff who asks the Court to decide the matter of his bond. When Shylock finally leaves the stage in the fourth act the main interest has departed, and the fifth act has seemed to many to be an unimportant though pretty addition to the story.

The opening scenes of Shakespeare, it has been maintained, strike the key-note of the actions and motives of the plays. To overlook these or to mis-understand them is to fail in grasping the meaning of the entire play. With the exception of *Hamlet*, no play has suffered more from this than *The Merchant of Venice*. Shakespeare seldom, if ever, mis-names his plays, and to call this play the "Merchant" rather than the "Jew" of Venice means that Antonio and not Shylock is to be the subject of the story. That Shylock at a later time and for a few scenes becomes the center of interest does not mean that the play ceases to be chiefly the story of Antonio.

It is therefore of prime importance to notice that the chief actors in the earlier scenes are Antonio and Bassanio, on the one hand, and Portia and Nerissa on the other. In these two scenes the motive of the entire play is laid before us, and Shylock has not yet put in an appearance, nor has his name once been mentioned. The Jew appears for the first time in the third scene, and finally disappears entirely, as everybody has noticed, before the close of the fourth act. This leaves the beautiful fifth act to complete the action begun in the first two scenes.

Shylock, then, is not the play, but only an important incident of the play. He appears only as a complication of the initial plot, which apart from him would

reach its solution when Bassanio chooses the right casket. This would complete the Caskets Story, which Shakespeare thus makes the main plot but not the entire plot of his drama. With this he complicates the Story of the Pound of Flesh, which introduces the character of Shylock. The third story, that of Jessica, is a link between the two, and helps to solve the complication caused by Shylock's hatred of the Christians.

At the opening of the play, Antonio is presented as "sad," and Portia as "weary." Antonio's first words are:

"In sooth I know not why I am so sad,  
It wearies me: you say it wearis you."  
(I. i. 1-2.)

Not much better is the condition of Portia, as her words indicate:

"By my troth Nerissa, my little body is aweary of this great world."

(I. ii. 1-2.)

Antonio's melancholy<sup>1</sup> and Portia's weariness both seem constitutional, and both foreshadow some of the difficulties and impending disasters that later develop in the play. Antonio always forebodes the worst, as in the Trial Scene when he is ready to give up and let Shylock claim his pound of flesh. Portia, though not so apprehensive, is equally disposed to take things seriously and to let them weigh upon her mind. The "sadness" of the one may be taken as helping to produce the situation of the Bond Story, and the "weariness" of the other as magnifying the uncertainty and hence anxiety of the Caskets Story. Both moods

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Furness, p. 2.

taken together forecast the serious and tragic nature of the two issues of the drama. All the elements of tragedy seem to be present, and are averted only by the inherent moral character of Fate.

The situation of the play, outlined in the first two scenes, is taken, then, entirely from the story of the Caskets. These two scenes present all the original persons of the drama. The action consists of Antonio's equipment, or the arrangements for the equipment, of Bassanio with the means to pursue his love for Portia. Because of his spendthrift habits Bassanio finds himself unable for want of money to furnish an expedition worthy of a pilgrimage to Belmont, to hazard his fortunes for the hand of the heiress. He therefore appeals to his wealthy friend, Antonio the merchant, for the necessary amount. His friend, however, does not have the ready money for the purpose, but as he is rich in ships and merchandise he offers to use his credit to borrow the money:

"Try what my credit can in Venice do,  
That shall be rackt even to the uttermost,  
To furnish thee to Belmont to fair Portia."

(I. i. 190-2.)

Bassanio has been called a mere adventurer, and not a true lover, because in soliciting aid from Antonio he does not plead his love for Portia, but proposes the matter only as a means "to get clear of all the debts I owe." His every word about the lady, however, lets us see that he is deeply in love with her, and his confidence of success bespeaks the assurance of a lover. Moreover, the entire course of the play certifies to his true love, especially his manly self-renunciation in the choice of the leaden casket. It would also be quite out

of the spirit of Shakespeare to make so much turn on the success of a fickle and adventurous love. The creator of Romeo and Juliet knew as few have ever known that it is only true love that can snatch victory from the most adverse conditions in life.

Portia, meanwhile, is languishing in the uncertainty connected with the choice of the caskets. This estimable young lady is the surviving daughter of a wealthy but eccentric old father whose will decrees that her hand shall be given in marriage only to him who shall choose the right one among three caskets arranged in accordance with his plan. She is very ill at ease under this necessity which seems to her only a strange form of chance. Suitors have come and have gone, some refusing to take the risk of loss, and leaving without making any choice; others have chosen wrong, and have accordingly been condemned to bitter disappointment and perpetual celibacy. Bassanio, however, who had previously come to Belmont in the company of another, had already made a very favorable impression on both Nerissa and Portia, who "remembers him worthy of praise." Thus Bassanio, even before the splendid expedition equipped by Antonio, is an acceptable suitor for the hand of Portia.

The theme of the drama, then, is derived in the first instance from the Caskets Story, and consists in Bassanio's pursuit of the love of Portia, equipped as he is by the generosity of his friend, Antonio. The love of Antonio for Bassanio supplies the situation that inaugurates the first conflict of the drama. This same friendliness, however, gets the merchant into conflict with the Jew. Then in turn, the happy culmination of Bassanio's love affair supplies Antonio with the legal skill of his friend's wife, by which he

eludes the clutches of Shylock. In the last act, then, there is a return to the original theme of the play, and Bassanio is enabled through his wife's riches to repay the debt to his faithful friend, Antonio. The Caskets Story thus furnishes the original theme of the drama, and in turn also the frame-work for the still more absorbing conflict of Christian and Jew, contained in the story of the Pound of Flesh.

## IV

Antonio's lack of ready money to equip his friend properly to undertake the expedition for the hand of fair Portia leads him to try his credit among the money-lenders of Venice, who of course are Jews. While potentially very rich, Antonio's wealth is all at sea in his many ships, and his bond is all that he can give for the ready money. This he is willing to give to show his friendship for the excellent Bassanio. The greatest and most absorbing conflict of the drama begins with the attempt of the Christians and Jew to arrange satisfactory terms for the loan of the money.

Now for the first time the venerable figure of Shylock appears upon the stage. It is to him that the Christians appeal for the necessary money; but he is very unwilling to lend to them until he hits upon the device of the pound of flesh as his security. The two are hostile parties from the outset, and the Christians expecting no kindness are prepared to give Shylock the most favorable terms. Differing as they do on all other matters they expect this to be a hard bargain. In their differences there are many elements of bitterness and resentment, but all alike grow out of the fact that the two parties belong to different races

and religions which have different standards and practices of business. The play, then, becomes Shakespeare's dramatic study of these two types.

The encounter of Antonio and Shylock, and the terms of the loan, the dramatist is careful to set before us clearly and fully. Bassanio has met Shylock on the Rialto, and has secured the promise of the money on the bond of Antonio. This at once introduces into the play the conflict of greatest interest, that between the Christian and the Jew. Even in the arrangements for the loan of the money we see the shadow of the great impending conflict between Antonio and Shylock. The attempt of these old enemies, the merchant and the money-lender, to strike a bargain arouses all their mutual prejudices and antipathies. Shylock, however, in his eagerness to strike a bargain endeavors to conceal his burning hatred. He foresees his long-looked-for chance to revenge himself for injuries done by Antonio. While outwardly professing friendship, to himself he says: "I hate him for he is a Christian." This hypocritical friendship is in strange contrast to the acknowledged unfriendliness of Antonio, who admits the indignities he has heaped upon the Jew, and professes he is as like to do the same again. If Shylock lends him the money it is not to be on the plea of friendship, but "rather to thine enemy." Antonio has nothing to conceal, and wishes to deal entirely in the open. He detests Shylock's methods and principles of business, but in the present emergency he is willing to come to his terms.

There is no doubt some truth in the accusation that Shakespeare's portrayal of Shylock is nothing but a caricature of the Jewish character. A similar criticism, however, might be made concerning the character

of Antonio as a Christian. In his *Jew of Malta* Marlowe is thought to caricature not only the Jew but also the Christian, for he makes them both rather despicable. In his play, however, Shakespeare has changed both for the better, and if he has not removed the caricature entirely from the Jew, neither has he removed it entirely from the Christian. If Shylock is a mediæval and not a modern Jew, Antonio is no less a mediæval and not a modern Christian. In this respect one portrait has but little advantage over the other, for both alike fall short of the many excellences of the Jewish and Christian characters with which we are now-a-days familiar.<sup>1</sup>

Excellent as he is in many particulars, Antonio, to us, is far from an admirable character. To his friends and fellow-Christians he may be magnanimous and generous, and Salanio calls him "the good Antonio, the honest Antonio." But to Jews he acknowledges no obligations, regarding them as dogs rather than men; while to Shylock in particular he is a contemptuous and implacable foe. He conceived no obligation of love to any but his friends, and made no apology for a bitter hatred and contempt towards his enemies. His circle of duty took in only those of his own creed and excluded those of other nations and creeds. His Christianity was essentially mediæval in its narrowness, both in doctrine and in practice.

Antonio is nevertheless the representative Christian of the play. He is not, however, a modern Christian, but was, no doubt, a good type of the Christian of his day. He embodies the narrow, mediæval conception

<sup>1</sup> Cf. "Shakespeare's Jew and Marlowe's Christians," by William Poel, in his *Shakespeare in the Theatre*, pp. 69-84.

of Christianity, and, therefore, he is not to us an ideal character.<sup>1</sup> His conception of Christianity is restricted and exclusive, but he conscientiously lives up to his notion of duty, and in every emergency makes his appeal to Christian principles and practices. In the conflict with the Jew, all the Christians become very conscious of their religious difference from Shylock, and side with Antonio as the representative of their religion. Between Shylock and Antonio, then, the conflict appears much less a personal matter than an antagonism of religion and ethics.

Shylock is portrayed as personally less excellent than Antonio, though a much more manly Jew than the English drama had ever presented before. No one, however, who knows anything of the Elizabethan frame of mind can fairly think the dramatist intended him as a hero and a martyr, or can imagine an audience regarding him as such. It is too great a stretch of imagination to maintain that Shakespeare intended the Jew for the very opposite of what his audience would undoubtedly understand him to be. Shylock's cruelty and vindictiveness make it impossible for us to think that Shakespeare intended him to be regarded as a noble but much abused Jew, whose only misdeeds were his acrimonious defences of himself and his race from the persecutions of the Christians. His characteristics are too strong and positive to admit of such a lenient view. Shakespeare could not fail to know that some of the qualities portrayed in him were among those that an Elizabethan audience would inevitably regard as most detestable. As Professor Stoll says, "Shylock was both money-lender and Jew. In

<sup>1</sup> Cf. "The Merchant of Venice as an Exponent of Industrial Ethics," by J. Clark Murray, *International Journal of Ethics*, Vol. IX, 1898-9; pp. 331-349.

him are combined two of the deepest and most prevalent social antipathies of two thousand years, still sanctioned, in Shakespeare's day, by the teachings of religion.”<sup>1</sup>

No doubt Shakespeare was in this as in all other matters more humane than his age, how much more humane may be measured by the difference between his Shylock and Marlowe's Barabas. The fact that he had to reckon on the antipathy of his audience toward the Jew would lead him to eliminate from Shylock all objectionable moral characteristics if he wished him to obtain their sympathy in the end. But this he has not done. He has left him with such personal characteristics as, in either Jew or Christian, would elicit the condemnation of his audience. It is only a modern actor before a modern audience that could make Shylock appear as more sinned against than sinning.

In his personal character, moreover, Shylock is portrayed as less excellent than Antonio. The merchant has many good and true friends, whose words and deeds testify to his generosity and to his many excellent qualities. But Shylock has scarcely any friends. Tubal seems to be the only one in whom he can confide, or in whom he can trust. His conduct has robbed him of any love in his own home. In all his dealings Shylock is portrayed as greedy, as miserly, and as tyrannical. If this were manifest only in his dealings with Christians, it might be considered an expression of religious ill-will and intolerance, but it is also shown in his treatment of his own household. His servant, Launcelot, leaves him for the service of the Christian, Bassanio, in hopes of better treatment, giving as his reason, “I am famished in his service.”

<sup>1</sup> *Op. cit.* p. 266.

His own daughter, Jessica, when she marries, prefers a Christian, hoping for better home conditions, for she says, "Our house is hell." Shylock's sorrow at her elopement is not so much at the loss of his daughter as of his ducats, and he would gladly see her brought home dead if only his ducats would also be brought in the coffin with her. "Jessica my girl," spoken by him as he leaves his home in her care, as Booth has remarked, "are the only words that Shylock speaks, which in the least degree approach gentleness, and they mean nothing."<sup>1</sup> Even his grief over the turquoise ring given him by his wife is more for its value than for its sentiment.

How far Shakespeare intends to imply that these are the characteristics of the universal Jew it would be difficult to say. But they are the characteristics of the universal money-lender, and Shylock was a Jewish money-lender. If not in his personal character, at least in his religion Shylock is undoubtedly presented as the typical Jew. In every particular he exhibits the mind and habits of the mediæval Jew, and in every extremity he puts forward the examples and principles of the Jewish religion, making them excuses for his greed and avarice and cruelty. He takes the Jewish Jacob as his example, and invokes the blessing of "father Abram," and looks to the Old Testament for all his moral precepts. It is therefore his religion quite as much as his personal character that is on trial in the play, just as in the case of Antonio. In every emergency both fall back upon the peculiar principles and practices of their religions, and it is these as much as the men that are tested in the final trial.

Thus the two men are led to exhibit the limitations

<sup>1</sup> Furness, p. 88.

of their principles by putting them consistently into practice. As Professor Moulton has well said, "Fiction is the experimental side of human science."<sup>1</sup> Shylock does not represent the best of his religion, and Antonio displays very little Christian charity. Both develop the irony of their positions by holding firmly to the letter that killeth and neglecting the spirit that giveth life. To this extent, then, the play is a battle of creeds, and not only "Portia's eloquent contrast between justice and mercy," as Dr. Brandes says, but also the issue of the play would no doubt be understood by the public "as an assertion of the superiority of Christian ethics to the Jewish insistence on the letter of the law."<sup>2</sup>

That the antagonism between the two men takes the forms both of religious creed and business methods may be seen in connection with the loan of money. Shylock then freely admitted that "Antonio is a good man," meaning that his bond was sufficient security, even though all his ships were at sea. He is reluctant, however, to lend to him, for as he says, "I hate him for he is a Christian." Then he adds the still deeper reason by saying that he hates him,

"more, for that in low simplicity,  
He lends out money gratis, and brings down  
The rate of usance here with us in Venice."  
(I. iii. 43-45.)

This is a conflict of methods of business, but it grows out of the differences in religion. The Christians, thinking money was barren, would not take increase or interest for its use. They did not know that it

<sup>1</sup> *Four Years of Novel Reading*, p. 4; Boston, D. C. Heath & Co.

<sup>2</sup> *William Shakespeare*, English trans., pp. 157-8.

was not money, but ewes and rams that really were borrowed, and that these have a natural increase. The Jews, having few other ways of living, had no scruples about lending money on interest. When, therefore, Shylock finally insists on lending the money without interest, as the Christians did, Antonio suggests, "This Hebrew will turn Christian, he grows kind." (I. iii. 183-4.)

The loan, however, is not arranged until Shylock has taken his opportunity to express the deep hatred, "a certain loathing," which he bears toward Antonio personally. He reminds him of the many indignities and insults he has endured from him, and of the patience with which he has borne it all. Then in a conciliatory manner he adds,

"I would be friends with you, and have your love,  
Forget the shames that you have stained me with,  
Supply your present wants, and take no doit  
Of usance for my moneys, and you'll not hear me,  
This is kind I offer."

(I. iii. 142-146.)

The Christians had not, however, expected anything but a hard bargain from their old enemy, and are greatly surprised at his apparently easy terms. He will not merely take no interest, but as security for the money he will take only Antonio's bond, which shall be signed "in a merry sport," that if the sum of money is not paid on such a day the forfeit shall be

"an equal pound  
Of your fair flesh, to be cut off and taken  
In what part of your body it pleaseth me."

(I. iii. 154-6.)

Antonio is quite willing to give this bond, as he feels secure in his many ships; but Bassanio protests strongly,

"You shall not seal to such a bond for me,  
I'll rather dwell in my necessity."  
(I. iii. 159-160.)

Antonio, having no suspicions, had no idea of the deep revenge that lay behind that apparently innocent bond. But Shylock knew:

"If I can catch him once upon the hip,  
I will feed fat the ancient grudge I bear him."  
(I. iii. 46-47.)

In spite of the further protest of Bassanio, who likes not "fair terms and a villain's mind," the bond is agreed to, the money passed over, and Bassanio betakes himself to Belmont.

## v

The object of Bassanio's quest, the beautiful and wealthy Portia, exhibits considerable concern as one after another of her would-be husbands chooses among the caskets. She and Nerissa have a good deal of serious merriment as they discuss the virtues of these suitors, and of apprehension as they lead them to the caskets to choose. Portia thinks it rather an unfair ordeal to subject her to such a chance, and considers it unwonted caprice on her father's part:

"I may neither choose whom I would, nor refuse whom I dislike,  
so is the will of a living daughter curb'd by the will of a dead  
father."

(I. ii. 23-25.)

It all looked as though she would be subject to the humiliation and danger of being won by chance. But such was not the case. What it did was to replace her right of free choice by an arrangement providing

for the higher necessity of her moral nature in securing as her husband a worthy and honorable man. The inscriptions on the caskets were so ingeniously devised that no one but a worthy man would ever choose the leaden casket—one who would truly love Portia, and whose character was guaranteed by the purity and unselfishness of his love. This faith the dramatist puts into the words of Nerissa:

"The lottery . . . will, no doubt, never be chosen by any rightly, but one who you shall rightly love."

(I. ii. 28-32.)

When the Prince of Morocco came to choose he was caught by the inscription on the golden casket: "Who chooseth me shall gain what many men desire." In his argument before choosing, he showed clearly that what he desired was the great wealth of Portia, as typified in the golden casket. Instead of what he expected, he found only "a carrion death," and a written scroll that reminded him that he had been guided by avarice to choose for gain.

Little better, if any, was the choice of the Prince of Arragon, who was taken by the inscription on the silver casket: "Who chooseth me shall get as much as he deserves." Then in his arrogant self-conceit and pride he felt sure that it was he who deserved the noble Portia: "I will assume my desert." And he opened the silver casket only to find "the portrait of a blinking idiot," to suggest to him his true worth, and to assure him that only fools boast of their deserts.

Bassanio, however, who had already won the love of Portia, came with a different motive, and chose the leaden casket with the inscription: "Who chooseth me must give and hazard all he hath." His love for Portia was so genuine and so intense that he was willing to

risk all to win her. The pure love he bore her made him the only one worthy of her. He could not lose on these conditions, for the inscriptions were of such a character that the false must lose and the true must win. There was no accident about the choice, but it was the outcome of a moral necessity. The ingenious scheme of her father was, therefore, vindicated, and Bassanio became the happy husband of the lovely Portia. No wonder the daughter of a father so clever should herself prove ingenious in the subsequent defence of her husband's friend.

While to all outward appearance the two contending parties to the loan are now at peace, these relationships are presently again disturbed. The conflict, however, is deep but not irreconcilable. The marriage of Jessica and Lorenzo, which soon follows, not only re-awakens strife, but also points out the manner of the ultimate reconciliation. By this marriage of Jew and Christian the dramatist announces his belief in the fundamental oneness of the two races, and suggests that love can reconcile all their conflicts. Love leaps all barriers. Even the conflict of Christian and Jew is not due to any primary antagonism in human nature, but to prejudices and accidental differences. Shylock and Antonio are not natural enemies, and need only the gift of love to overcome their differences. The dramatist, as in the case of *Romeo and Juliet*, sets out to reconcile the apparently irreconcilable. Knowing the heart of man as no other writer of all time he is the one that has most faith in human nature.

Shylock's pretence of reconciliation appears in its true light when the time draws near for Antonio to pay the loan. The reported loss of all Antonio's ships gives Shylock an excuse to clamor for his money.

When he finds the merchant cannot pay, denying all pleas for an extension of time, he causes him to be arrested, and appeals to the Court for permission to collect the forfeit of his bond, "a pound of flesh." With this his real purpose of taking the life of some of his enemies is revealed. The Christians had never really trusted Shylock, in spite of his apparent readiness to forget the past and be friends. But they had felt secure in the many ships Antonio had upon the seas, for if even one came home in time they could discharge the loan, and, as Antonio assured Bassanio, they were all due "a month before the day." In the calamitous failure of all the ships, however, Shylock found his opportunity to revenge his "ancient grudge" upon Antonio.

In the failure of all Antonio's ships and in his consequent inability to meet the bond, Shylock finds his opportunity. After the arrest, he pushes his suit with all haste and as speedily as possible brings the matter before the law. He feels perfect confidence in the validity of his bond, and awaits only the verdict of the court to cut off his pound of flesh and take the life of the hated Antonio. But as an alien he did not thoroughly understand the law of the dramatist's Venice, and did not comprehend its moral principles.

## VI

The Trial Scene, deservedly one of the most popular in Shakespeare, is also one of the deepest and fullest in meaning. Into this scene the dramatist has condensed all his thought on the great contest of Christianity and Judaism, which through all the centuries has remained unsettled. It is needless to say that

Shakespeare does not treat these religions as dogmatic systems of theology—with which a dramatist has nothing to do—but as practical systems or codes of moral principles. His interest is in their moral and spiritual values, and it is only as such that they are on trial in the Court Scene.

In the Trial which Shylock has invoked we begin to feel sure that the conflict between the two men is no longer a mere personal matter, but has become a conflict of their religions and of the methods of business that have grown out of their religions. Shylock would seem now to regard himself as the representative and avenger of his people, and takes upon himself the burden of avenging the centuries of cruelty and scorn that had been heaped upon his people. He very gladly assumes this rôle of representative, and gloats over the opportunity of “bettering the instruction” of the Christians. As Antonio likewise considered himself the representative of the Christians in the dealings with the Jew, both men are representative of their races, of their religions, and of their mutual animosities. They represent, then, not only the personal attitudes of two men of different religions, but the religions themselves. By appealing to the Court Shylock has made real the conflict of the two religions, and has made comparison inevitable. But with that insight which is always his chief characteristic, Shakespeare has contrived a situation in which it is not the dogmatic theologies of the two religions that come to trial, but their practical systems and codes of moral principles. It is only the moral and spiritual values of the two religions that are brought to trial in the Court Scene.

Shylock's refusal to accept the full amount of the

bond when proffered him in Court reveals a thirst for revenge and not a mere desire for justice, as he pretends. The unworthiness of his motive is further disclosed when he declines twice the amount, and then thrice, with the same unhesitating scornfulness. He steadfastly declines all but the forfeiture, the pound of flesh, to be cut off, as he says, "nearest the merchant's heart." He is bent on having the penalty and forfeit of his bond, for with that must go the life of Antonio, for whom he acknowledges "a lodged hate and a certain loathing."

Every conceivable inducement was brought to bear upon Shylock to extend mercy to Antonio, and not to push his bond to the point of claiming the forfeiture. The first speech of the Duke after Shylock entered the Court was a plea for him to show "human gentleness and love." Portia likewise, whom the successful culmination of the love story of the caskets had provided as a champion for Antonio, begs him to "be merciful." In her fine speech on "the quality of mercy" she vainly urges upon the Jew the necessity of mercy between man and man, as between God and man. She discloses the limitations of justice as a rule of life by citing the fact that it cannot be universally adopted. We all need to receive mercy, she nobly says, for "in the course of justice, none of us should see salvation." She further presses upon him the petitions of the Christian prayer which teaches us when we pray for mercy to render also the deeds of mercy. All these admonitions Shylock impatiently repudiates, exclaiming:

"My deeds upon my head, I crave the law,  
The penalty and forfeit of my bond."  
(IV. i. 216-7.)

He stands firm upon the law of justice, thinking himself on safe ground, for as he had earlier said, "What judgment shall I fear, doing no wrong?" The drama becomes now a study of the adequacy of Justice and Mercy as rival principles for the government of human relations. These two principles, then, are brought to trial in the play, the former as the moral principle of Judaism, and the latter as the moral principle of Christianity.

These two religions had been similarly interpreted by Christ in the Sermon on the Mount: "Ye have heard that it hath been said, An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth: But I say unto you, That ye resist not evil: but whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also." Justice, or the principle of "an eye for an eye," is denounced as a principle of life; and Mercy, or giving more than you must, is substituted. Life is larger than law, and morality than legality. This has long been recognized, as in the old expression, *summum jus, summa injuria*.

The two contestants are not to be understood as personal embodiments of the principles they represent. Shylock had not been throughout his life all for justice nor Antonio all for mercy. The Jew had been better than his law and the Christian worse than his. But they have professed these principles, and have in extremities made their appeals to them. Hence, it is the principles as well as the men that are on trial. The play, then, develops from a conflict of persons to a contest of representative individuals, each standing for the ideal of the religion he professes. Portia's eloquent contrast of Justice and Mercy, and the final defeat of Shylock, can only be understood as the dramatist's declaration in favor of the principle of Mercy,

or a verdict for the Christian ethics.

The persistent refusal of Shylock to yield to these strong entreaties serves to draw out the many resources of Portia in her effort to save her husband's friend. The Court cannot compel mercy, for it is a principle of conduct, not of law. Herein is shown the limitation of "law" as an expression of ethical principles. The decision of the Court must be strictly legal, and judgment is pronounced in favor of Shylock. He is at once reminded, however, by Portia that his bond calls for only "flesh"; and he is informed that if he shed "one drop of Christian blood" his lands and goods will be "confiscate unto the State of Venice." Again, he is told that if he takes more than just a pound of flesh, he must himself die, since his bond calls for "a just pound," no more and no less. Further, he is told that because he has contrived against the life of a citizen he has forfeited his own life, which lies now at the mercy of the Duke only.

At this juncture the Christian principle of mercy that Shylock has scornfully rejected as a guide to his own conduct comes to his rescue and intervenes to save his life. His extreme predicament instantly humbles his proud spirit, and the Duke at once seizes the opportunity to say,

"That thou shalt see the difference of our spirit,  
I pardon thee thy life before thou ask it."  
(IV. i. 385-6.)

Shylock as quickly avails himself of the interposition of the principle he had so recently scorned, and his life is saved. But in accepting the mercy of the Duke, the Jew tacitly acknowledges the complete defeat of his own principle as a moral code. He was conscientious, however, in holding to his code until he saw it de-

stroyed. His principle had had a most severe test, and its failure disclosed its defects and the superiority of its rival.

## VII

Much criticism has been offered upon Shakespeare's conduct of the Court Scene, as it seems entirely out of accord with English practice and English legal procedure. Neither judge, nor plaintiff, nor defendant, nor counsel, seem to conduct themselves as in an English court, and the verdict seems a travesty of justice. The judge seems to be counsel for the defense, the plaintiff seems to be his own counsel, and the counsel for the defendant seems to pass the judgment of the Court. This seeming irregularity continued to be confusing and at times disconcerting to critics, until 1886, when, in a letter to *The Overland Monthly*, Mr. John T. Doyle made it known that the procedure of the Court of Venice was the same as had survived to that day in some of the Latin Republics of South America. Mr. Doyle relates at some length his experience in the law courts of Nicaragua, and then says: "With this experience, I read the case of Shylock over again, and understood it better. It was plain that the sort of procedure Shakespeare had in view, and attributed to the Venetian court, was exactly that of my recent experience. The Trial Scene opens on the day appointed for hearing judgment; the facts had been ascertained at a previous session, and Bellario had been selected as the jurist to determine the law applicable to them. The case had been submitted to him in writing, and the Court was awaiting his decision. The defendant, when the case is called, answers as is done

daily in our own courts: 'Ready, so please your Grace.' " Continuing, Mr. Doyle draws the parallel still further between the two cases, in the matter of procedure, making it quite clear that Shakespeare was following a well-known and established form of procedure, and not devising one of his own. It is the usual thing to find at last that Shakespeare does not need to be rewritten, but only to be understood.<sup>1</sup>

A much more serious charge is made against the dramatist, however, when it is asserted that in the Trial Scene the law is perverted in favor of Antonio and to the discomfiture of Shylock. It has been held by Campbell and others that Portia's interpretation of the law is nothing but a legal quibble, and that Shylock is condemned only on a perverted construction of a plain contract. Any court, it is said, would grant whatever is necessarily and inseparably connected with a main judgment rendered. If blood is unavoidably shed in cutting out a pound of flesh, then any court that would permit flesh to be taken would also allow blood to be shed. If, for instance, a man buys a number of loads of gravel from his neighbor, he is allowed to leave a hole in his neighbor's field, even if that neighbor should some day kill himself by falling into it. The English law of Shakespeare's day, and for a long time afterwards, permitted debtors to be put to death for non-payment. Shylock, then, it is said, should have been allowed to claim the penalty of his bond, with all that pertained thereto. To deny him this was to wrest the law from its course, and to

<sup>1</sup> For Mr. Doyle's article, entitled "Shakespeare's Law—The Case of Shylock," cf. *The Overland Monthly*, for July, 1886. For a summary of the article, cf. Furness's Variorum Edition of *The Merchant of Venice*, pp. 417-420.

bend it to the peril of Shylock—and all because he was a Jew.<sup>1</sup>

This phase of the case has been most ably and fully treated by Judge Nathaniel Holmes, in *The Western Galaxy* for April, 1888, a paper that has escaped not only the keen eye of Dr. Furness, but most of the other critics of Shakespeare as well. By ample quotations Judge Holmes shows that Shakespeare conducted the legal phase of the Trial Scene in strict accordance with the theory and practice of English law, which always considered the equity as well as the strict law in a case. In a case of the year 1615, about twenty years after Shakespeare's play, cited by Judge Holmes, the King's speech, prepared by the Attorney General, Sir Francis Bacon, expressly declares in a comparison of the English with other courts of law, that "it [the English] exceeds the other courts, mixing mercy with justice, where the other courts proceed only according to strict rules of law; and where the rigour of the law in many cases will undo a subject, then the Chancery tempers the law with equity, and so mixeth mercy with justice as it preserves men from destruction,"—the very legal doctrine enunciated by Portia in her great speech on "the quality of mercy." It becomes clear from this that while the dramatist followed the Latin form of procedure as would be expected in a Venetian court, he nevertheless intended to settle the case of "Shylock versus Antonio" in strict accordance with the theory of English law and with the spirit

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Campbell, quoted by Furness, p. 405. By way of answer to this criticism Professor Moulton remarks that "the suitor who rests his cause on a whim cannot complain if it is upset by a quibble." (*Shakespeare as a Dramatic Artist*.) But this does not meet the issue, for Shylock did not rest his cause on a whim, and Portia did not upset it on a quibble.

of English practice, by tempering justice with mercy. The poet apparently conceived his Christian and moral principle of "mercy" to be nothing but the English legal principle of "equity" in another form.<sup>1</sup>

It cannot, therefore, be claimed that the verdict of the court was technically unsound, but only that it introduced the principle of equity, apparently unknown in Venetian law, but with which Shakespeare was quite familiar in English law. This worked no injustice to Shylock, and in no way injured his case, for if it was invoked in the first instance to save the life of Antonio, it was also later invoked to save his own. The application cannot be claimed as wholly in favor of Antonio, for in both instances alike the law was set aside by the law, in the larger interests of equity. Shakespeare, in accordance with English legal theory, recognizes that the law is always in danger from itself, and that the law must ideally be made to work out the Right, even if in so doing it discredits itself. In his dramatic world, at least, Shakespeare is free to show that mercy is of more moment than legality, for it is an ethical demand.

Shylock, therefore, in the play suffers no injustice, for he had been offered his principal, together with twice the amount for any damage he might have sustained from the delay. In the face of his refusal to accept this proffered payment of his bond, together with twice the amount as penalty, no further or no other penalty could be legally or justly demanded. The pound of flesh was only a penalty for non-payment, and could not be demanded in place of the prof-

<sup>1</sup> "Shylock's Case," by Judge Nathaniel Holmes, in *The Western Galaxy*, published in Salt Lake City, Vol. I, No. 2, pp. 209-217, April, 1888.

fered money. As Judge Holmes remarks, "By the strict rule of common law, the day of payment having passed, the bond was forfeited, and the penalty was due; but by English equity the penalty was regarded as a security, and when the party was ready to pay the principal, with interest by way of compensation for the delay, the plaintiff was bound to take it, or have nothing: the defendant was relieved against the penalty only."<sup>1</sup>

By this law, if this were all, Shylock might yet have his principal, and end the case. He therefore says, "Give me my principal and let me go." But that was not all the law. Having invoked justice and the law, he must abide by the law to the end. He cannot reject the instrument he has invoked, as soon as he finds it reacting against him. It is the privilege of the defendant to hold to the umpire chosen, and Portia proceeds to call up other laws of which Shylock seems to have been ignorant. She shows that by the law Shylock's attempts on Antonio's life have made his own life forfeit. She does not, however, press this law to his undoing, but immediately invokes in Shylock's behalf the same principle of equity, or mercy, by which she had previously saved Antonio. According to the law, the matter now lies with the Duke, and he at once pardons Shylock's life before he asks it, thereby showing, as he says, "the difference of our spirit." By this he means that he will show the Christian spirit in dealing with the Jew.

It is Antonio, however, who exacts what has seemed to many the hardest conditions. The same law that made Shylock's life forfeit also gives to Antonio half of Shylock's goods. Part of these Antonio at once

<sup>1</sup> "Shylock's Case," p. 211.

restores to him on condition that he immediately become a Christian,—the hardest of all things for Shylock. It means that he must renounce not only his Jewish faith, but also his methods of business, for usury was forbidden by both Christian belief and practice. This condition, it should be remembered, was not in the original story, but was added by Shakespeare himself. It was the dramatist who demanded that “He presently become a Christian.” This has been considered very unjust, and as Ten Brink says, “It is only against his being forced to become a convert that our feelings justly rebel.”<sup>1</sup> Yet it was a common enough occurrence in those days to compel Jews to become Christians, and by adopting it the dramatist indicates that under the conditions Shylock might fairly be called upon to accept baptism. To this the Jew feebly consents, and at once requests permission to leave the court, alleging only, “I am not well.” The illness was, of course, in his spirit, and was caused by his complete discomfiture in his suit against Antonio. The demand to become a Christian had been the last straw to break his spirit, and he left the court in humble submission. This has been considered the crowning injustice of a very unjust trial, but as Shylock preferred it to the law he had invoked and to the loss of his life, it need not be regarded as completely intolerable.

A great deal of sympathy has been wasted upon Shylock by two classes of people. One of these always sympathizes with the vanquished, whether victim or criminal, and the other class has overlooked some of

<sup>1</sup> *Five Lectures on Shakespeare*, by Ten Brink; Eng. trans. by Julia Franklin, p. 190; New York, Holt, 1895.

the elements in the situation.<sup>1</sup> It should be kept in mind that the Christians were face to face with a very difficult problem. One of their number had been in danger from a Jew who had tried as a penalty for a loan to take the Christian's life. It was now fully realized that Shylock was trying to "feed fat the ancient grudge" he bore Antonio. The reason of this grudge was also now seen to be chiefly the fact that in lending out money gratis, according to the Christian principle and practice in the matter, Antonio had incurred the implacable hatred of Shylock, the money-lender. The Court had turned the tables on the Jew, who had saved his life only by accepting from the Christians the very mercy that he had been so unwilling to give.

It was but natural, then, that the Christians should demand some guarantee from Shylock that the next time he got Antonio or any other Christian in his danger he would show the same mercy that was now saving his own life. It was simply a measure of self-defence. If mercy is a good thing to get, it is an equally good thing to give. It is not fair to run with the hare and hunt with the hounds. If Shylock is now to benefit by the Christian principle of mercy, it must be on the condition that in future cases he will also give the same benefit to others. There is a golden rule even for Jews. If he repudiates the justice of Judaism and accepts the mercy of Christianity, in order to save his own life, he must give assurance that he will remain a Christian, and in all future conflicts will bestow the "mercy" of Christianity. He cannot be a Christian in accepting mercy, and turn round and be a Jew in demanding justice. He must be either all Jew or all Christian, and he must now take

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Brandes, *op. cit.* p. 165.

his choice once and for all.

The only way that mediaeval Christians could see to accomplish this purpose was to demand of Shylock that he formally accept baptism. It is very true that to us there might be other ways of drawing the fangs of Shylock and of guaranteeing consistency, but to them there was no other way. They knew of only two creeds, two religions, and two moral codes,—the Jewish and the Christian. They did not distinguish between the creed and the ethics of Christianity, and to assure themselves that Shylock should adopt the practice of Christianity, they compelled him to accept its creeds and its forms. As a guarantee that henceforth Shylock should live according to their principles, they obliged him to be baptized. Antonio was certainly justified in putting Shylock under bonds to be more merciful the next time he had a Christian in his power; and the only way he knew to accomplish this was to require him formally to become a Christian. And this is also sufficient justification for the dramatist.

The closing words of Judge Holmes, in the article previously cited, seem appropriate at this point: "And, on the whole, we have a strong conviction that the imaginary Jew of the Middle Ages (as the mythical type of him had become fixed in the popular mind of that age), not merely as Jew, but as another name for the unconscionable usurer and soulless money-getter of all sects and ages, really got his deserts from first to last at the hands of both judge and poet, and that the ideal judge intended to teach the ideal Jew that there was in the poet's Venice both law and equity, that strict law was not always justice, and that it was better for all men to season justice with mercy than to contrive a wicked fraud, in a relentless spirit

of revenge, against an unsuspecting debtor, under pretence of kindness and under cover of getting a security, but really intending to take his life under color of law, but contrary to law, justice and mercy—as the Duke said—

‘A stony adversary, an inhuman wretch,  
Uncapable of pity, void, and empty  
From any dram of mercy.’”

(IV. i. 6-8.)

### VIII

The fifth act of the play has been generally misunderstood. These words from Brandes fairly express the common mistake: “Shylock disappears with the end of the fourth act in order that no discord may mar the harmony of the concluding scenes. By means of his fifth act, Shakespeare dissipates any preponderance of pain and gloom in the general impression of the play.”<sup>1</sup> Rather, as *The Merchant of Venice* is primarily the story of Antonio and his friends, it was necessary for the dramatist to present clearly the completed love of Bassanio and Portia that had been the means of the triumph of Antonio in the Trial Scene. In blending the two stories of the Caskets and the Bond the dramatist had undertaken to work out a better and larger purpose for love than was contained in the old story. In the fourth act love had triumphed in Portia’s deliverance of Antonio, and with the close of this act the play passes beyond the point of highest passion. But the beautiful and harmonious fifth act is necessary to complete the meaning of the play as a whole, by depicting the culmination of all the love stories of the earlier part.

<sup>1</sup> *Op. cit.* p. 167.

The success of Bassanio's quest for Portia's love had provided a champion for his sorely pressed friend and bondsman, Antonio, and had become the means whereby he was released from impending death through the forfeiture of his bond. The legal skill of Bassanio's wife has repaid many times the value of the money Antonio had expended on fitting out the expedition to Belmont. Portia's love for her husband had urged her to come to the rescue of his friend and had inspired her to use her best endeavors on his behalf.

Shakespeare, therefore, was not content to close the story of Bassanio and Portia without depicting their completed love after the trying time of the Trial Scene. To him love exists not for its enjoyment or its beauty, but for its moral and spiritual value and for its social uses. After portraying, then, with exquisite taste the beautiful Caskets Scene and showing the self-abandoning love of Bassanio for the fair Portia, he left the love story until he had depicted the triumph of love in Portia's efforts in behalf of her husband's friend in his danger from Shylock.

But now that love has discharged its function in the rescue of Antonio and even in the sparing of the life of Shylock, the dramatist once more returns to the love story and gives us pictures of the happiness of the lovers themselves. The exquisite moonlight scene depicts the perfect love and happiness of Lorenzo and his lovely Jessica, and the beautiful comedy of the rings reveals in a most striking manner the noble part of Portia in the release of Antonio. Nothing could have served more admirably to enhance Bassanio's love for Portia, or to assure him that his love was fully reciprocated. The element of romance in their love has been absorbed into the great reality of complete devotion

in a very great emergency. Their love has now been tried and been found true. These delightful scenes of the fifth act, then, are not only welcome distractions, as Professor Raleigh says, but are necessary to the completion of the love stories of the earlier part of the play.

This happy culmination of all the stories of the play seems to be an attempt of the dramatist to depict his conception that love is the true and indeed the only reconciler of all our human conflicts. Love has solved all the conflicts of the play. The love of Bassanio and Portia and their united love for Antonio, on the one hand, and the love of Lorenzo and Jessica, on the other, suggest that all such conflicts may be reconciled under the sweet and holy influences of love. Many of the differences among men are due to misunderstandings, not to inherent antagonisms, and may be overcome by love. This conclusion of the play, then, presents as do all the closing scenes of Shakespeare's plays a full and final solution of the conflict of the drama.



OTHELLO:

THE TRAGEDY OF A MOOR IN VENICE



## CHAPTER IV

### OTHELLO: v

THE TRAGEDY OF A MOOR IN VENICE

#### I

**F**EW of the plays of Shakespeare have from the first excited more intense interest among both theatre-goers and readers than the sad story of Othello and his life in Venice. The nature of the Moor's difficulties and the deep pathos of his catastrophe have brought the play closer to the lives and bosoms of men than any other of the great tragedies. The general excellence of the character of Othello, the noble Moor, and of Desdemona, the fair maid of Venice, together with the distressing nature of their marital conflict have made *Othello* the most heart-rending and the most moving of all the tragedies of Shakespeare. Many persons who can observe with comparative calmness the awful conflict of aged father and ungrateful, ambitious daughters in *King Lear* are almost overcome by the appalling sadness of Othello's mistrust and murder of his young and beautiful wife. The passion of Othello seems more titanic, and the conflict more vital and elemental than that of *King Lear*. The ruin of filial relationships seems less a tragedy than the overthrow and failure of the marital relationship, and the fate that befalls Desdemona even less deserved than that which befalls Cordelia. Professor Bradley has truly

said, "There is no subject more exciting than sexual jealousy rising to the pitch of passion; and there can hardly be any spectacle at once so engrossing and so painful as that of a great nature suffering the torment of this passion, and driven by it to a crime which is also a hideous blunder."<sup>1</sup>

While all have been impressed by the deep and absorbing passion of the play, it has not always been for the same reason. Shocked as all have been by the awful catastrophe, the real nature of the conflict and of the outcome has been variously interpreted. The very intensity of the passion has doubtless confused our notions, and sympathy and horror have often taken the place of careful study and clear thinking. Admiration for the "noble Moor," compassion for the "divine Desdemona," and scorn for the intriguing Iago, have misguided our judgments, have obscured the story of the play and the very words that should reveal the true character and actual deeds of the persons. In some cases both artistic sensibility and moral judgment have been paralyzed, until Othello has become a perfect hero, Desdemona a spotless saint, and poor Iago a fiend incarnate. Instead of appreciating the play as it is written, and perceiving the informing thought of the dramatist, this emotional criticism has made the injurer noble, his chief victim a saint, the injured a devil, and Shakespeare—foolish.

*Othello* has doubtless been very difficult of interpretation. More than half a century ago the *Edinburgh Review* (1850) expressed only the truth when it said that "all critics of name have been perplexed by the moral enigma which lies under this tragic tale." Since

<sup>1</sup> *Shakespearean Tragedy*, pp. 177-8. London, 2nd edition, 1905.

these words were written the opinion has become all but universal that it is the moral aspects of the play that have made it difficult to understand. The passing years, moreover, have forced the conviction upon many students that as the enigma of this play, and of many others, is "moral," so the true interpretation must likewise be "moral." The solution of a play that is a "moral enigma" must come if it comes at all from a solution of the moral aspects of the play, which can be reached only by a due consideration of all the moral relations of the various persons of the drama. And while it must be admitted that no expositions thus far have proven entirely satisfactory, the many earnest attempts to unravel the "moral enigma" mark the only successes up to the present time that criticism has made with this most fascinating drama.

There is no external source from which we can learn Shakespeare's dramatic purpose, and we can only infer it as we see it unfolded in his plays. Like all the dramatists up to his time he let his plays speak for themselves, and unlike many later dramatists he left no word of comment or explanation. The dedications of Jonson, and the prefaces of Dryden and others have served to disclose their dramatic purposes and even to interpret their dramas. But Shakespeare has left us no dedications and no prefaces. If he has revealed anywhere his conception of the function of the drama it is in Hamlet's directions to the players, and these do not help us in the interpretation of any particular play. Whether Shakespeare shared the opinion of most other English dramatists and critics of his time that the drama should not only please but profit the audience we cannot know directly. Three centuries of study have not yet made clear his attitude toward

the principle of "poetic justice," as the moral aspects of the drama came later to be called. To this day the discussion has gone on, and many students are inclined to think that in *Othello* and other plays he has ignored this principle altogether.<sup>1</sup>

In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries when criticism was almost entirely didactic, it was all but unanimously agreed that Shakespeare paid no attention to moral subjects or to ethical forces. The burden of the critics from Rymer to Johnson was that Shakespeare had violated all our fundamental notions of "poetic justice," or in other words had paid no attention whatsoever to moral considerations. In his discussion of this subject Rymer chose *Othello*, as Professor Alden has recently said, "to show the extreme results of neglecting this principle, on the part of the more or less barbarous Elizabethans. What unnatural crime had Desdemona committed to bring such judgment upon her?" Rymer's own words are very strong: "What instruction can be made out of this catastrophe? . . . How can it work, unless to delude our senses, disorder our thought, addle our brain, pervert our affections, corrupt our appetite, and fill our head with vanity, confusion, tintamarre, and jingle-jangle?"<sup>2</sup> The same opinion was still held in the time of Dr. Johnson, nearly a century later. In the preface to his edition of Shakespeare Johnson says: "His first defect is that . . . he sacrifices virtue to convenience, and is so much more careful to please than to instruct, that he seems to write without any moral purpose . . .

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Quinlan, *Poetic Justice in the Drama: The History of an Ethical Principle in Literary Criticism*, University Press, Notre Dame, Indiana, U. S. A., 1912.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Professor R. M. Alden, "The Decline of Poetic Justice," *Atlantic Monthly*, February, 1910, pp. 260-7.

he makes no just distribution of good and evil, nor is always careful to show in the virtuous a disapprobation of the wicked. . . .”

These critics are in substantial agreement with all other English criticism, whether applied directly to Shakespeare or not, in their demand that the drama should not violate our fundamental moral notions. The history of the principle of “poetic justice” in English criticism shows that English thought has always applied itself to the more ethical phases of the drama, but we shall find that the classical and formal conceptions of the principle held in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were hopelessly inadequate for the living and romantic Elizabethan drama. The criticism as well as the drama of that period falls far short of dealing adequately with large and living conceptions, and when they attempted to interpret Shakespeare their limitations became very apparent. The classical period was utterly unable to deal with any dramatist at once so large and so vital as Shakespeare.

In the nineteenth century there arose a generation of romantic critics who knew not the classicists of the ages of Rymer and Johnson. These equally with the earlier critics demanded that Shakespeare should square himself with our moral conceptions, but they had outlived the formalism of their predecessors and had learned to look in other places for Shakespeare’s “poetic justice.” Actuated with the stubborn notion that his moral conceptions were not to be found in explicit utterance, or in didactic phrase, they began to look for an implicit morality in the construction and conduct of the narratives of the plays, and in so doing opened up the most fruitful of all eras of Shakespeare study.

The first of this long line of able critics was Coleridge, with whom as a recent writer has said, "Rational appreciation may be said to begin in England."<sup>1</sup> It was a vast step forward in criticism when this great man, poet and critic in one, laid aside the idea that Shakespeare was in need either of revision or criticism, and inaugurated the modern attempt at interpretation. Though succeeding ages have found plenty of reason for dissenting from many of his opinions we have never really departed from his method of interpretation.

In his study of *Othello*, as of other plays, Coleridge made a diligent search for the dramatic motive, and tried to find out the underlying reason for the catastrophe that had puzzled earlier critics. Instead of trying to show defects in Shakespeare's notions of poetic justice, he attempted to find the reason if not the justification for the catastrophe. Carefully surveying the play, he reached the conviction that in *Othello* Shakespeare was portraying a man whose misfortunes were due to the intrigue of another, and were not intended by the dramatist to appear as retribution for any of his own misdeeds. In Iago and his evil mind Coleridge found the sole cause of Othello's tragic end. To Iago's "motiveless malignity" must be ascribed, he says, the entire catastrophe. This man is "a being next to devil, and only not quite devil."<sup>2</sup> It is his evil and jealous mind that works all the harm done to Othello and his wife.

From this it is clear at any rate that Coleridge saw the importance of a right understanding of the relations of Othello and Iago for a proper comprehension

<sup>1</sup> Johnson, *Shakespeare and His Critics*, p. 18; Houghton, Mifflin & Co., 1909.

<sup>2</sup> *Lectures on Shakespeare* (Bohn's Library), p. 388.

and interpretation of the play. It will appear, however, as we proceed that Coleridge overlooked some of the most important factors in the relations of these two, and that he had not shaken off entirely the eighteenth century habit of trying to form our own opinion of Shakespeare's characters, instead of ascertaining the dramatist's opinion. It is of course permissible for any one to differ from the dramatist about any of his characters, but it is not permissible to substitute this opinion for the dramatist's, and then on this basis charge the dramatist with being inartistic or with a violation of our moral principles. Even less satisfactory, however, is Coleridge's treatment of the relations of Othello and Desdemona, a proper understanding of which is all but as important as that of Othello and Iago. This also will call for the most careful study. But, though Coleridge's treatment of these two topics has not settled the interpretation of the play, it can be freely maintained that the method he adopted is the only hopeful method for the interpretation of the drama.

## II

In the matter of Othello and Iago, it cannot fairly be maintained that Iago was the sole cause of the calamities that befell Othello. In general it must be said that there is no Shakespearean tragedy in which the responsibility for the deed of the hero and the subsequent tragedy can be shifted from him to another person of the play. Shakespeare no doubt did not have the conception of the influence of social forces that some modern dramatists display, for that is a conception belonging to the nineteenth century. Professor

Stoll may be correct when he says that "In no case does Shakespeare represent men as overwhelmed by anything so vague and neutral as social forces," but he is surely incorrect when he adds, "or as devoured by their own passions alone."<sup>1</sup> It is this very conception of the consuming and destructive power of passion that marks the superiority of Shakespeare's conceptions over that of his contemporaries. This "fatalism of overmastering passion," as it has been called by Professor Corson,<sup>2</sup> is the distinguishing feature of Shakespeare's conception of man's relation to the world, and marks the culmination of the Elizabethan drama, and its superiority to the classical drama where men are overcome by external fate. In the case of *Othello*, as of all the other tragedies, it is the passion of the hero that is the mainspring of all the action of the play that finally and certainly destroys the hero. There are two or three types of such passion in Shakespeare, according to their moral character, but all alike give rise to the action of the play and lead the hero to his fate.

Beginning, then, with this passion, it is the art of Shakespeare to place his characters under those conditions that will show the true nature of their passion and develop it to its fullness and to its fated end. It is one of Shakespeare's supreme excellences that he realized that "every man is tempted when he is drawn away of his own lusts and enticed," and that every man's condemnation comes from the development of his own passions. It was under the sway of this conception that Shakespeare brought Othello into his fatal conflict with Iago, for this drew from him all the hid-

<sup>1</sup> Cf. "Criminals in Shakespeare and in Science," by E. E. Stoll, in *Modern Philology*, Vol. X, p. 59.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Corson, *Introduction to Shakespeare*, Preface.

den passion of his nature. To make Iago the sole cause of the tragedy that befell Othello is to seek outside the human heart for the causes of human failure. The wonder is that Coleridge, philosopher and genius that he was, could content himself with an explanation that does such violence to a true moral psychology. But Coleridge may have had a personal interest in laying the blame outside the soul of the one who is overcome by weakness or by fate. *Othello*, like all of Shakespeare's plays, is a drama of character, not a drama of intrigue. But only a very careful study of the leading topics of the play will make this clear.

The attempt to solve the moral difficulties of *Othello* has never been given up entirely, though quite recently two distinguished critics have taken "the moralists" to task, and have appeared to think that the chief excellence of the drama is in its "moral enigma." Professor (Sir) Walter Raleigh has made a vigorous attack, and says that "The moralists have been eager to lay the blame of these events on Othello, or Desdemona, or both; but the whole meaning of the play would vanish if they were successful."<sup>1</sup> Professor Bradley, in a somewhat similar strain, rejects all the more obvious interpretations of the play, because, as he says, they "reduce Shakespeare to common-place."<sup>2</sup> Both alike refuse to give credence to any view that does not make Shakespeare subtle and far-fetched and mystical. They seem ready to reject alike what is common-place and common-sense.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Shakespeare, "English Men of Letters," Eversley edition, p. 269. London, 1909.

<sup>2</sup> *Shakespearean Tragedy*, p. 208.

<sup>3</sup> Professor Stoll has characterized the Shakespearean criticism of Professors Raleigh and Bradley as "the most bewildering thing in the world to read, whether taken as a whole or piece by piece. Truth is tangled with error, fact with fancy, criticism,

The names of these two eminent critics have carried more weight in some quarters than their theories have deserved, and some students have been too willing to give up the search for a true moral interpretation of the plays. Others, however, dissatisfied with this complete moral scepticism of Shakespeare, and with this substitution of the critic's fancy for the poet's vision, have made attempts to find a larger moral meaning for the plays, and have tried to assign some kind of large spiritual principles in place of the plain moral principles it was thought necessary to abandon. The suggestion has been made that in cases like that of Desdemona there is only an apparent defeat and nemesis, but that in reality there is a much higher spiritual vindication, and that the close of the play marks a complete spiritual triumph in which the human spirit remains "essentially unconquered." Professor Alden, as the latest spokesman of this view, says, "If the love of Desdemona had perished in the face of injustice and falsehood, then we should have had indeed a chaos of spiritual wreckage, a poetical injustice for which no mere beauty of form could easily atone. But on the contrary there remains in each case, amid the very crash and vanishing of all earthly hope, a spirit that transcends common humanity as far as its suffering has transcended common experience, proving anew through poetry that the world of the senses is 'inferior to the

in short, with poetry, and there is no test at hand to tell one from the other.' He goes on to say that their confusion is due to the lack of 'the historical spirit.' 'Everybody has his own Shakespeare, in his own image and after his own heart. A sentiment transforms a feature . . . or a sentiment exaggerates the beauty and significance of features already there!' E. E. Stoll, article on 'Anachronism in Shakespeare Criticism,' pp. 557-575, *Modern Philology*, Vol. VII, No. 4, April, 1910.

soul.' " <sup>1</sup>

This, as criticism, seems somewhat better, for it grants our inexorable conviction that Shakespeare is after all a moral dramatist, and tries to square himself with our moral principles. But, unfortunately, this kind of criticism makes a demand of us that no generation of theatre-goers or readers has ever been able to meet. To picture Othello and Desdemona as in the end not failing but actually triumphing, as Professor Alden finds himself obliged to maintain, is to think of them as in the same class as the suffering Job, and as Romeo and Juliet. He says, "If the individual experience often seems to be at odds with everything but itself; if Job suffer for no reason such as can be stated in general terms; if Juliet and Romeo are the victims of the animosities of their parents . . . ; if Desdemona dies because her pitiful life has found a number of malignantly potent trifles looming so big for the moment as to shut from view any source of active justice . . ." <sup>2</sup>

This, however, it is impossible to admit. The writer of "Job" explicitly declares that Job was a righteous man, and that his misfortunes were entirely due to the malignity of the evil one. Neither were his misfortunes of the nature of moral catastrophes, as were those of Othello and Desdemona. In Shakespeare, as in the Bible, the misfortunes that are objective in their source are never moral in character. Romeo and Juliet were undoubtedly "the victims of the animosities of their parents," or in other words were the victims of social conditions for which they were personally in no way responsible. About their misfortunes, however, there is

<sup>1</sup> Alden, *op. cit.*, *Atlantic Monthly*, February, 1910, p. 267.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 267.

not the slightest suggestion of retribution, and as Carlyle long ago observed, their apparent defeat is really a moral victory. But it is very different with Othello and Desdemona, for there is an element of retribution in their misfortunes. The play explicitly depicts them as the authors of all the elements of their social conditions that give rise to their conflicts and subsequent misfortunes.

It should be remembered that Othello was not a son of Venice, but a foreigner, and moreover a foreigner of a different race and color, with all that that means of divergence of mind and character. Moreover, there was no conflict between Romeo and Juliet, for their love was perfect, but the conflict was between their united and unwavering love and the hostility of their families. In the case of Othello and Desdemona the conflict becomes acute and finally fatal between husband and wife, and from this the play takes its character of a hapless mismatch.

All these unsuccessful attempts to understand the drama come from long-continued but erroneous habits of interpretation. The plays have been treated as if they were historical documents and not works of poetic imagination. Historical documents have to be evaluated by the student, and often parts are judged to be unauthentic and hence of little or no value. But literary products cannot be treated in this manner, for every word of a great poet has been elaborated with curious care and is of value to the whole, and cannot be ignored. Some critics who regret that we have no external comments of Shakespeare upon his plays persistently ignore the numerous comments the dramatist has made within the plays. It must be claimed that Shakespeare's dramatic methods are not subtle and

elusive, but pre-eminently artistic and open. They are indeed so artistic that they have concealed his art, and unfortunately have also concealed his mind from us. We have steadfastly overlooked even his most obvious attempts to make his meaning clear, and have missed all his own comments, which are the best keys to his plays. We have, moreover, explained away his own very plain words, we have ignored his conduct of the plot of the dramas, and have refused to accept as part of his plan the very issues of the plays themselves that he has elaborated with such unequalled skill. No wonder if we have begun to think perhaps after all the plays have no meaning to be discovered.

## III

Let us begin, then, our study of this play by observing very carefully whatever comment Shakespeare has made upon it. In the very title, *Othello, the Moor of Venice*, we have the dramatist's comment that the play is to be the story of a certain Moor, Othello, who had abandoned his native land and had taken up his residence and life in the Italian city of Venice. In doing this Othello had left his native Africa, or Spain,<sup>1</sup> and undertook to live his life in Venice. The Moors of both Africa and Spain were looked upon by English-

<sup>1</sup> "Shakespeare, in IV. ii. 257, seems to point to Mauritania as the native country of Othello, who is hence to be regarded as a Moor in the proper sense of the word, a native of the northern coast of Africa, toward the west. . . . Moor, however, it may be observed, was used by English writers very extensively, and all the dark races seem, by some writers, to be regarded as comprehended under it." Hunter, *New Illustrations of Shakespeare*, II, p. 280. Quoted by Furness, the Variorum *Othello*, p. 390. In all probability Shakespeare thought of Othello as from Spain, which for long had been inhabited by and under the domination

men and other Europeans as barbaric or semi-barbaric, while the Venetians were looked upon as the most civilized and cultured people of Europe.<sup>1</sup> The change took Othello among another race of another color, one that Shakespeare and most of his countrymen of whatever time considered a much superior race. Now if Shakespeare had any aptness in giving titles to his plays, and did not add mere idle words, the play must be considered "primarily a study of a noble barbarian who had become a Christian . . . but who retains beneath the surface the savage passions of his Moorish blood . . . and that the last three Acts depict the outburst of these original feelings through the thin crust of Venetian culture."<sup>2</sup> This is Professor Bradley's statement of the view which has been held, but which he scouts as impossible. His chief argument against it, however, is that it is not like Shakespeare, adding that "To me it appears hopelessly un-Shakespeare of the Moors. After his sword had been taken from him in the last act, Othello says:

"I have another weapon in this chamber,  
It is a sword of Spain, the ice brook's temper;"  
(V. ii. 314-5.)

In *Lore's Labour's Lost* Shakespeare makes the king speak "of many a knight: from tawny Spain" (I. i. 184-5). Here he is evidently thinking of the "tawny Moor." Cf. Coleridge, *Lectures on Shakespeare* (Bohn's Library), pp. 477 and 529.

<sup>1</sup> Hunter's remarks about Venice in his comments upon *The Merchant of Venice* apply equally well to this play: "In perusing this play we should keep constantly in mind the ideas which prevailed in England in the time of Shakespeare of the magnificence of Venice. Now, the name calls up ideas only of glory departed--'Her long life hath reached its final day;' but in the age of the poet Venice was gazed on with admiration by the people of every country, and by none with more devotion than those of England." Quoted by Furness in the Variorum *Merchant of Venice*, p. 3.

<sup>2</sup> *Shakespearean Tragedy*, pp. 186-7.

spearean." Ever since Schlegel's time,<sup>1</sup> however, this has been the generally accepted interpretation of the play, though of course there has been disagreement about details. But this recent imaginative criticism has given us a new *Othello*, a new *Hamlet*, and verily a new Shakespeare; and instead of the vision and the faculty divine of the great dramatist we have the fancies of the critics. This criticism has succeeded in little, however, but in convincing itself that Shakespeare is mystical and modern, that he wrote with a very vague notion of what he was doing, and that frequently in his haphazard manner he misnamed his plays. It is now time for criticism to reach the conviction that Shakespeare wrote with a very clear notion of what he was aiming at, and not by mere intuition or chance. Only if we take this attitude is it possible at this day to discern the true thought and intent of his dramas.

The entire drama is Othello's story, though from the outset Iago takes the initiative, and seems to be the protagonist. The situation, however, has been created by Othello in every particular, and from this springs all the action or rather the reaction of Iago. By his action, previous to the opening of the play, Othello furnished the motive for Iago, from which springs all his intrigue. It is only under the clever manipulation of Iago that Othello is put on the defence, from which he does not escape until near the close of the play. The real conflict of the play, then, is between Othello, with whom is joined Desdemona, on the one hand, and Iago, his ancient, on the other. From the outset, Othello is struggling with a situation which he inaugurated before

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Schlegel's *Lectures on Dramatic Art and Literature*, Lecture XXV, Eng. trans. in Bohn's Library.

the opening of the play, and which grows more complex as the movement develops.

The first scene of *Othello* presents a conversation between Roderigo, the disappointed suitor of Desdemona, and Iago, concerning incidents of which Othello is the chief agent. Othello and Desdemona have eloped, it seems, leaving Roderigo disappointed and distressed. He complains that Iago had not forewarned him in order that their marriage might have been prevented. But Iago, though in close touch with Othello, protests he did not "dream of such a matter," implying that it was as much a surprise to him as to any one. For some time Iago had what he considered good reason for hating the Moor, though this latest episode enables him for the first time to see through the whole affair. Othello's attachment to Desdemona now explains why he was passed by and the new appointment of lieutenant to Othello was conferred upon Cassio. Iago now [suspects that the post was given to Cassio by reason of Desdemona's friendship for him, and because he was a go-between in the courtship of Othello and Desdemona.]<sup>1</sup> For this Iago now declares his hatred of the pair, and intimates his willingness to join Roderigo in an attempt to harass Othello, and if not too late, to prevent his marriage.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Bodenstedt, referred to in Furness, p. 5.

<sup>2</sup> Professor Bradley warns us against believing on his sole authority "a syllable that Iago utters on any subject, including himself." (*Op. cit.*, p. 211.) To this Professor Stoll replies: "Iago is a liar, no doubt, but it is to confound fact with fiction and to knock the props from under Shakespeare's dramatic framework to hold that Iago's soliloquies are lies." (*Op. cit.*, p. 561.) But in addition to his soliloquies Iago's explanation to Roderigo of his hatred for Othello must be taken as the truth. It is conceivable that Iago or any other character fictitious or real may not be fully conscious of his own motives, but it is scarcely conceivable that a dramatist, much less the greatest, would make the

After his usual manner Shakespeare has made the opening conflict, that between Othello and Iago, the chief conflict of the play.<sup>1</sup> But this is a conflict between two men who had up to this time been the nearest and warmest friends, one a great general and the other his most trusted officer. There is plenty of evidence throughout the play that up to this time there had been the fullest confidence between the two, and both alike were looked upon as men of excellent ability and sterling character. Othello was known as a noble Moor and had attained the highest military position, and therefore must have had the fullest confidence of the state and the senate. Every one regarded Iago also as an upright and noble-minded man, and he had earned for himself the epithet of "honest." But all at once the "honest" Iago becomes the mortal enemy of the "noble" Moor. We must then account for this change, as upon this change all the development of the play depends. This is the play. Shakespeare has apparently been at pains to show us what Iago's attitude toward the Moor *was*, as well as what it *is*, and the explanation of the change can be found only in the play itself. We must explain it either from the incidents of the play or from the words of the play, or from both.

The incidents that take place at the opening of the play, at the same time as the change in the attitude of Iago, are two, the courtship and marriage of Othello

chief conflict of a play out of a pack of lies and develop it into one of the greatest tragedies of literature. The great dramatist has no plays that present the defeat of truth at every turn, and the final triumph of lies, as this play would then denote. We must believe that Shakespeare is not just trifling with great vital and moral issues, but trying to understand them.

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Hodell, *op. cit.*

and Desdemona, and the promotion of Cassio to the position of lieutenant under Othello. The words of Iago at the opening of the play show that he regards the latter as an offence to himself, and therefore makes it the ground of his hostility to Othello. He complains that Cassio has "had the election," and that,

"He (in good time) must his [Othello's] Lieutenant be,  
And I (bless the mark) his Moorship's Ancient."  
(I. i. 34-5.)

At a later time he comes to see some connection between the two incidents, and believes that Cassio got the appointment because of an old friendship with Desdemona, and probably because he carried messages between Othello and Desdemona during their courtship.

When Othello had occasion to appoint a lieutenant, "Three great ones of the city In personal suit" appealed to him on behalf of Iago, only to find that he had already chosen Cassio. It appeared to be a matter of personal preference only, for he could give no reason for the choice of Cassio. This capricious choice Iago at once took as a very great slight upon him, and rightly so. As one of "the usual lunacies," so-called, in the interpretation of the play, however, Professor Bradley says, "It has been held, for example, that Othello treated Iago abominably in preferring Cassio to him."<sup>1</sup> But the "lunacy" on this occasion is to be charged to Othello in utterly disregarding and flouting the principle of preferment that holds in military circles more rigorously than perhaps anywhere else. This is the basis of the complaint of Iago, and arouses at once his suspicion and bitter resentment, and soon turns him into an abiding but very stealthy enemy.

<sup>1</sup> *Shakespearean Tragedy*, p. 208.

If Othello can be capable of such gross violation of all military rules and practices, Iago sees that he can no longer trust Othello, and that all confidence between them has virtually ceased to exist, and no longer can he hope for the intimate relationships of former days to continue. This rewarding of Cassio with a military position because of personal service to himself and Desdemona was a most dangerous thing for a general to do, and opened up all kinds of possibilities of trouble, not only with Iago, but with the discipline of all his forces. Only the fortune that favors fools could save him from disaster. But it was fatal when one of the disposition of Iago was involved, for it turned him at once into an enemy, not only to himself, but to all the others connected with the insult, to Desdemona and Cassio, linking all three in his plan of revenge.

Here, then, is an outstanding fact that too few critics have even observed, and none have adequately explained. At this point in the lives of Othello and Iago a great change comes over their relations. It cannot be too much insisted upon that up to this time they had been the warmest and closest friends, and that Iago had been in fact the confidential officer of Othello. Now all at once, for some reason that has not been understood, Iago has been turned into the bitter enemy of his old friend, Othello, and as if to mark the importance of this for the interpretation of the play, the dramatist has chosen this point in their relations for the opening scene. But in spite of all that has been observed about the importance of Shakespeare's opening scenes for the exposition of his dramatic art, little attention has been paid to this fact in respect to *Othello*. The task of the critic at present, then, is to discover the cause of this great change in the relationships of these two men,

and from this to trace the further development of the play.

Ever since Coleridge it has been the common thing, though by no means universal, to attribute the whole trouble to the sudden and unmotived malignity of Iago, or to forget the fact that it has been sudden and unlike anything heard of before on the part of Iago, and to assume only the malignity. Later critics, however, have not been able to overlook the emergence of the malignity at this time, and have attempted to explain it from their own imaginations rather than from the words of the play. Professor Bradley may be taken as voicing the best that can be said by those who would lay all the blame of the tragedy upon Iago, but who feel they must account in some manner for this sudden malignity. Not content with charging Iago with the evil the play undoubtedly lays upon his shoulders, Professor Bradley suggests that Iago has always been in reality a villain, and has worn his "honesty" only as a mask, which now he throws off, revealing suddenly the real villain that he is, his true nature. He has always been, says Professor Bradley, "a thoroughly bad, *cold* man, who is at last tempted to let loose the forces within him."<sup>1</sup> But this is sufficiently answered for the present if we have succeeded in discovering a change of attitude on the part of Othello, due to his infatuation with Desdemona, and to the fact that he found Cassio very serviceable in his love-making. A complete criticism of the assigned motive of Iago, and an attempt at the elaboration of his real state of mind must be left until after we have followed the conflict through the initial stages, when we shall be better able to judge the real merits of the case.

<sup>1</sup> *Shakespearean Tragedy*, p. 218.

Sufficient reason has been found, however, for declining to admit that the drama is the story of the intrigue of Iago, and as the name would intimate it is the play of Othello. There is also now justification for attempting to explain the play as in the main the tragedy of the Moor in his new home in Venice. In our attempt to find the explanation of the tragedy in the hero, as assigned by the dramatist, we seem forced to say that now at last, when a crisis comes upon him, the great Moorish general, transplanted from the wilds of his African or Spanish home into the cultured and refined life of Venice, finds himself unable to bear honorably all the great responsibilities of his high position and his new life. It may be that the dramatist, who was a man of peace and had little admiration for the Cæsars and other great warriors, is here taking his opportunity to show how little of the higher virtues dwells in great military ability. But the fact that he makes Othello a Moor, and so designates him throughout the play, must also be accounted for.

Up to this time Othello had borne himself nobly in his adopted state, and had the full confidence of the people and the senate, and was universally acknowledged to be the first soldier of Venice. But at this point he fails. For once, and for the first time, he allows purely personal considerations to sway him from following the established order of preferment in the army, and does a great injustice to Iago. With no reason that he dare give, he appoints a wholly inexperienced man in preference to a tried and proven soldier who had fought under his own eyes, "At Rhodes, at Cyprus, and on other grounds Christen'd and heathen." (I. i. 31-2.) This wholly unwarranted action rightly grieved Iago, who took it as a great slight,

for he believed he was entitled to promotion. It also shook his confidence in Othello, and roused in him all his force of resentment and turned him into a bitter enemy of Othello.

Thus far in Shakespeare's play there is not so much as a hint of the motive assigned to Iago in Cinthio's novel, the presumed source of the play. The dramatist has almost completely changed the point of view of the whole story, by inventing an entirely new, and perhaps loftier if not better, motive for his Iago. On the other hand, he transformed the one he found in the story, and invented the character of Roderigo to bear that vulgar part. Then he invents a second motive for Iago, and makes him hate Othello also for his supposed relations with Emilia. By way of revenge for this offence, Iago's first impulse is to try to corrupt Desdemona, and thus get even with Othello. But how little this was his intention is seen by the fact that he never seems to have seriously considered it. In place of this, however, he has an alternative that becomes his ruling motive, to put Othello into a jealousy of Cassio. This he thinks will serve to revenge himself on Othello for both offences at one blow:

"And nothing can, or shall content my soul  
Till I am even'd with him, wife, for wife.  
Or failing so, yet that I put the Moor  
At least into a jealousy so strong  
That judgment cannot cure."

(II. i. 331-5.)

The two offences with which Iago charges Othello are both matters of honor, and mark phases of Othello's inability to sustain the new and exalted life of his adopted country. He was quite equal to the task of maintaining his military, or semi-barbaric, relations

to the state, and rose to the highest command in Venice. But in matters of personal honor he is not above reproach, and in his obtuseness offends Iago in two ways. Some critics think it is because of such offences as that with Emilia that Othello is unable to maintain an undisturbed married relationship with his refined and delicate Venetian bride. But his guilt is left very doubtful by the play, and therefore this conclusion is unwarranted. It is sufficient to observe, however, that the clear-headed Iago perceives this to be his most vulnerable point, and by enlisting the dupe, Roderigo, attacks him where he is weakest.

Iago's dominating personality quickly subjects Roderigo to his schemes, and makes him a willing agent in his revenge. The first thing they do is to rouse up Brabantio, and under his leadership institute a search for the eloping pair. Shakespeare has here greatly enlarged and dignified the meaning of his play by making Roderigo, and not Iago, the disappointed suitor of Desdemona. Iago is thus reserved for the more tragic passion, and Roderigo bears the baser motives, and at the same time supplies the needed money, and helps to carry out the intrigues of the crafty ancient. Their joint appeal to Brabantio will be the best possible plan of attack on Othello, as it will show Othello in opposition to the law and to a senator of the state. Iago wishes at first only to plague Othello with flies, but the sick fool, Roderigo, stupidly hopes still to become the accepted lover of Desdemona.

Iago sees it is quite out of the question to enter upon a course of open hostility and revenge against his General, and the appearance of friendliness will better serve his purpose. His inferior position compels him to play the hypocrite, and appear to continue faithful

to Othello. But this very position enables him the better to work out his purpose, which is not to destroy Othello, but only to disturb his relations with Desdemona, and to put him into an agony of jealousy. Iago does not fully understand the fierce nature of Othello, and does not appear at first to foresee the terrible extremes to which his barbaric and ungovernable passion will drive him. He realizes that he must at no time be found in a position "Against the Moor" (I. i. 162), and therefore separates himself from Roderigo, and hastens to join himself to Othello, in order to appear on his side in the ensuing disturbance.

## IV

It is at this point that the second of the great problems of the play emerges. The proper understanding of the relations of Othello and Desdemona is equally important with the question of the relations of Iago and Othello. The exposition of these two elements of the play is set forth by the dramatist with his usual clearness, and at considerable length, but has nevertheless escaped the notice of the critics, or has been discounted as a factor in the interpretation.<sup>1</sup> But it is high time to learn that whatever Shakespeare put deliberately into his dramas is to be considered in the interpretation.

The meeting of the two search parties, each seeking Othello for a different reason, brings the relations of Othello and Desdemona into prominence. The party of Cassio, with the Senate's hasty summons to Othello, serves to give dramatic importance to Othello's great ability as a commander, and to emphasize his military

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Bradley, *Shakespearean Tragedy*.

value to Venice. Brabantio and his troop serve to bring out the private side of Othello's character, hitherto unsuspected. When the two parties meet, Brabantio is in a very quarrelsome mood. The cool words of Othello prevent a clash between the two:

"Keep up your bright swords, for the dew will rust them."  
(I. ii. 75-6.)

The sudden danger from the Turks at Cyprus has made great dispatch necessary, and the Duke has ordered Othello before him "even on the instant." Brabantio's appeal to the Senate occurring at the same time, Othello appears before the magnificoes in the double capacity of the General of the state entrusted with a great military exploit, and as an eloper with Brabantio's daughter.

The Moor now finds that his old friend, the Signior Brabantio, formerly his admirer, has unexpectedly become his accuser before the Senate. Formerly honored as a friend and as a great soldier, and gladly admitted to Brabantio's house, Othello discovers that he is now considered an enemy, and execrated as the husband of Brabantio's daughter. For the first time, possibly, Othello becomes aware of the fact that he is not accepted on terms of full and exact equality in all particulars with the Venetians. It is likely, however, that Othello had feared this, and so took Desdemona in marriage without asking her father, evidently satisfied that as a black man he could not obtain Brabantio's consent.

When the matter is brought before the Senate, Brabantio's objections to Othello all have to do with his difference of race and color. He thinks it utterly unnatural for Desdemona to accept him willingly and knowingly. He cannot conceive how his daughter, a

fair maid of Venice, could consent to marry a man of Othello's color and nationality, unless in some way out of her senses. So preposterous does it appear to him that he must suppose Othello has charmed her with drugs and magic. He cries out in his desperation:

"She is abus'd, stolen from me, and corrupted  
By spells, and medicines, bought of mountebanks;  
For nature, so preposterously to err,  
(Being not deficient, blind, or lame of sense)  
Sans witch-craft could not."

(I. iii. 75-9.)

He reiterates his belief that it is "against all rules of nature," and speaks of Othello's supposed magic as "practices of cunning hell." Brabantio, at least, thinks the marriage of Moor and Venetian, of black and white, to be utterly preposterous and unnatural, and doubtless the other Senators shared this conviction. It seems likely that this was also the opinion of the dramatist, for there is abundant evidence that it was always so regarded on the Elizabethan stage. Only the development of the drama will show how far Shakespeare sympathizes with this opinion.

Two deeds upon the part of Othello have now brought him into active collision with other persons, and the two are related to each other. Because of his obligations to Cassio in the matter of his love-making with Desdemona he has appointed him to an important position over Iago, thus making an enemy of his faithful officer. He has also stolen away Desdemona from her father, and secretly married her, making an enemy of Brabantio, who had been one of his greatest admirers among the Senate. In both cases there is evidence of his callousness and dullness of mind. Up to this point Othello had been able to carry successfully his exalted respon-

sibility in his adopted state, but in these matters he makes a complete break-down. Not even his superior military training could save him. He could perform well the duties of military life, but now it begins to be evident that he is not fitted for the higher and more exacting arts of peace, and especially of love, in a civilized state. When Othello leaves "the tented fields" for the streets and homes of a refined city he utterly goes to pieces, and whatever sense of honor he may have had speedily gives place to a dangerous caprice. An unsuspected weakness, or deficiency, in his character is thus laid bare, upon which the whole tragedy will later be seen to turn.

This deficiency, it is now important to notice, the play implies is due to his racial character, and comes from the fact that he is a Moor. The half-civilized Othello is but ill adapted for life in civilized and cultured Venice. Some critics endeavor to make out that nothing whatever of the happenings of the play are in any way connected with the fact that Othello is a Moor. They allege he is nothing but a man, though he happens to be a black man. His color, they say, is an entirely indifferent matter in the play, and can be all but ignored in the interpretation. On this assumption, however, the many references to his color and race throughout the play cannot well be explained.<sup>1</sup> This view takes for granted that the dramatist heaps up idle words having no significance, and refuses to believe that there was a meaning in all he wrote. It is not necessary to hold, as Professor Bradley would have us believe, that the dramatist must be credited with clear doctrines of *Kulturgeschichte* if we are to maintain that he made the problem of Othello at least

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Note D., pp. 298-300, *infra*.

in part a problem of race. Feelings of racial differences did not have to wait for the Germans of later times to write histories of culture. In Shakespeare's day the discovery of new lands and new peoples must have impressed all thoughtful Europeans with the conception of their own superiority in all the arts and character of civilized life. And the play makes Othello quite as conscious as any one else of his diversity of race, though it is to other causes that he assigns his want of grace and culture.

When charged before the Senate with the abduction of Desdemona, Othello's defence consists of a frank and free admission that he had taken Brabantio's daughter, and an apologetic account of his "whole course of love." He pleads that he is "little blest with the soft phrase of peace," for he has spent all his life in "feats of broils, and battle." (I. iii. 104 ff.) In the course of his apology, his "round unvarnished tale" becomes eloquent with a barbaric sincerity and splendor that almost enlists the sympathy of the Senate. The story of "the battle, sieges, fortune" he had passed is almost as potent with the senators as it had been with Desdemona, who, he says,

"lov'd me for the dangers I had passed,  
And I lov'd her, that she did pity them."  
(I. iii. 190-1.)

He further says he is ready to abide by the decision of Desdemona, and advises the senate to call her to speak for herself. He considers the marriage to be a matter for themselves alone, and implies that the lady has a right to choose her husband without her father's consent.

There are numerous Shakespearean plays which seem to bear out the idea that the dramatist thought it to

be the woman's right to choose her own husband, without meeting her father's wishes in the matter. But there are many differences, and these must be given consideration. Shakespeare undoubtedly approves such choice when it means a larger and fuller life. Juliet disobeyed a tyrannical and hateful father to find a larger life and a true spiritual union with Romeo. In the same spirit Imogen refused the coarse and villainous Cloten, to join hands and hearts with the virtuous Posthumus. The lovely Jewess, Jessica, ran away from the miserly Shylock to marry the Christian, Lorenzo, and at the same time accepted the religion of her husband. In all these cases the maidens found their true life with the men of their own choice, and the dramatist gives his verdict in making their love happy and successful, and in bringing out of their marriage a larger good to all.

There are in these and other instances, however, many differences from the case of Othello and Desdemona. It is not so much the wilful disrespect to her father that is the fault of Desdemona, though some critics make a great deal of this,<sup>1</sup> but the fact that in marrying Othello she showed a wilful disregard of her own highest in-

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Bodenstedt, who says: "So long as family ties are held sacred, Desdemona will be held guilty towards her father by every healthy mind. Without keeping in mind this wrong, in which Othello shares . . . the drama loses its sacredly tragic character, and degenerates into a mere intrigue. For that such a finished villain as Iago should destroy the happiness of two such excellent persons as Othello and Desdemona, without at the same time, consciously or unconsciously, serving higher purposes, can make an impression which is only sorrowful, not tragic. It is otherwise when we take things as they are and keep strictly to the Poet's own words, putting nothing into the play, but explaining everything by what is in it. Then Desdemona's tragic fate affects us because we see that she is the fate herself which prepares the soil whereon Iago sows the seed of his deadly mischief." Eng. trans. in Furness's *Variorum Othello*, p. 441.

terests. It can scarcely be maintained that the marriage of Othello and Desdemona was a complete spiritual union, for there were too many diverse elements that at the time seemed incompatible and in the end proved entirely irreconcilable. It is true, of course, that as in the case of Juliet the passion of love transformed Desdemona from a meek and blushing maiden into a strong and self-reliant woman. There need be no attempt to deny the reality of the love of these two, and its effect upon their development, but it was not strong enough or natural enough to overcome all its enemies, as a true and natural love like that of Romeo and Juliet can do. Under some conditions it is possible that their love might have outlived their lives and overcome its handicaps, yet it is to miss the art of this drama not to see that the dramatist is here showing its unnaturalness by placing it in the conditions that test it to the uttermost and that reveal its weakness and bring it to defeat.

When Desdemona is brought into court to speak for herself in the matter of the marriage, she declares that she freely and lovingly takes Othello for her husband, and intimates that she is willing to take all the consequences of that act. She affirms her love for the Moor, and her desire to live with him, and requests to be permitted to accompany him to Cyprus. She says she understands fully what she is doing, recognizes Othello as a Moor, but that she accepts him as he is, for, as her words imply, she finds compensation for his color in the quality of his mind, in his honors, and in his courage:

"My heart's subdu'd  
Even to the very quality of my lord;  
I saw Othello's visage in his mind,

And to his honors and his valiant parts  
Did I my soul and fortunes consecrate."  
(I. iii. 278-282.)

Seeing her determination and her willingness to abide by her decision, her father accepts what seems inevitable, but leaves them with the needless and cruel remark:

"Look to her (Moor) if thou hast eyes to see:  
She has deceiv'd her father, and may thee."  
(I. iii. 323-4.)

These words let us see where Desdemona got her wilfulness, and relieve us of the necessity of grieving much over the sorrows of her father in this most unfortunate marriage.

## v

In some recent criticism there has been an attempt to glorify the purity and beauty of the love of Othello and Desdemona, and to place it among the most spiritual of the loves of Shakespeare. Professor Bradley speaks of Desdemona's choice of Othello as rising "too far above our common level," and adds: "There is perhaps a certain excuse for our failure to rise to Shakespeare's meaning, and to realize how extraordinary and splendid a thing it was in a gentle Venetian girl to love Othello, and to assail fortune with such a 'downright violence and storm' as is expected only in a hero."<sup>1</sup> But this is only another instance of that fanciful criticism that makes a new Shakespeare, and yet thinks it is interpreting the old. If Goethe's suggestions for the re-casting of *Hamlet* in order to express better the meaning have not helped but hindered

<sup>1</sup> *Shakespearean Tragedy*, pp. 202-3.

the understanding of Shakespeare's drama, we should learn the lesson of letting the dramatist have his way. Some of the critics before Professor Bradley have more truly seen the character of the love of Othello and Desdemona. Professor Dowden has observed that "In the love of each there was a romantic element; and romance is not the highest form of the service which imagination renders to love. For romance disguises certain facts, or sees them, as it were, through a luminous mist."<sup>1</sup>

Snider has noticed that the qualities in Othello that attract Desdemona are "his bravery against external danger," that is, physical rather than mental or moral qualities, and that "no feats of mind, or skill, or cunning are recorded."<sup>2</sup> Her love, indeed, seems to be a kind of romantic fascination, a love of the sensuous imagination, what Professor Herford properly calls "a perilous ecstasy of the idealizing brain without secure root in the heart."<sup>3</sup> The last mentioned writer shows clear insight when he contrasts the love of Othello and Desdemona with that of Romeo and Juliet, which so "completely possesses and occupies their simple souls, that they present no point of vantage for disintegrating forces."<sup>4</sup> Apparently it needs to be said over again that no conflict arose between Romeo and Juliet, but that all their trouble was with a world arrayed against them. But, between Othello and Desdemona, on the other hand, a most distressing conflict arose that almost completely overshadowed the original conflict and ended only in the greatest catastrophe of the

<sup>1</sup> *Shakspeare—His Mind and Art*, p. 232, 13th edition, 1906.

<sup>2</sup> *Shakespeare Commentaries: Tragedies*, p. 95, St. Louis, U. S. A., 1807.

<sup>3</sup> Eversley *Shakespeare*, Vol. VIII., p. 290.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 290.

drama. Instead of bearing a comparison, the loves of the two plays are in almost every way a contrast.

The marriage of Othello and Desdemona was a union of different races and colors that the sense of the world has never approved. The marriage of black and white seems always to have been repulsive to an Elizabethan, as to a modern audience, and dramatists before Shakespeare had always presumed that to be the case. Shakespeare no doubt shared this feeling, for in the two plays where no doubts on the matter are possible he follows the usual tradition. Assuming he had a part in writing the play, he has made Aaron, the Moor of *Titus Andronicus*, not only repulsive but a veritable brute and as cruel as Marlowe's Barabas. And in *The Merchant of Venice*, about whose authorship there can be no doubt, and which is earlier than *Othello*, he had previously portrayed a Moor as a suitor for the hand of Portia, and presented him as unsuccessful. When the Prince of Morocco chooses the golden casket, only to find "a carrion death" awaiting him, Portia remarks:

"A gentle riddance: draw the curtains, go.  
Let all of his complexion choose me so."<sup>1</sup>  
(II. vii. 80-1.)

His color is recognized as a natural barrier that makes him a very unwelcome suitor. Even his royalty is not to Portia a sufficient compensation. Othello, too, feeling that some compensation must be offered, pleads before the senate his "royal lineage," apparently wishing them to infer that with this outer advantage he becomes the equal of his wife. Desdemona likewise offers her

<sup>1</sup> The Stage-direction of the First Folio calls the Prince of Morocco "a tawny Moore." Though the Prince is from Morocco and Othello from Mauritania, to Shakespeare both were alike Moors.

plea and says she has found the necessary compensation in his "mind" and in his "valiant parts." But this does not appear to any of the other persons of the drama or to the dramatist as sufficient. Marriage makes a demand for absolute equality between the parties, and is likely to prove fatal in those cases where apologies and excuses are necessary.

It has not generally been observed that Shakespeare makes more of this racial difference than did Cinthio, the Italian original. To Cinthio it is almost entirely a matter of a difference of color, which in itself is external though not unimportant. But to Shakespeare, who always reads deeper than others, it is on the surface a matter of color, but at bottom a matter of racial divergence that amounts to an incompatibility of character. It is this difference of character that Shakespeare elevates into a matter of the greatest dramatic importance, as it appears to all students who take their notions of the play from Shakespeare's play itself. Lamb, freely admitting his "Imperfect Sympathies," remarks that *in reading* the play we like to see Desdemona forget Othello's color and love him for his mind's sake,—see his visage in his mind; but *in seeing* it on the stage we "find something extremely revolting in the courtship and wedded caresses of Othello and Desdemona."<sup>1</sup> Professor Wilson's remark of more than half a century ago in *Blackwood's* (1850) is still to the point: "That the innate repugnance of the white Christian to the Black Moorish blood, is the ultimate tragic substratum,—the 'must' of all that follows."<sup>2</sup> And most people feel the same unless obsessed with some a

<sup>1</sup> Lamb, *Works*, London, 1870, III, 102; quoted in Furness's *Variorum Othello*, p. 410.

<sup>2</sup> Quoted, Furness, 392.

*priori* notion of equality that they profess to believe, but never care to put into practice.

There is much evidence in the play that Shakespeare associates the deficiencies we have seen in Othello's character with his race and color. It is not important for our purpose to consider the truth of this conception, but enough to notice that Shakespeare so regarded it, though there will not be many readers who will disagree with the dramatist. Shakespeare has done all he could to make Othello appear a great soldier, a strong man, and a noble character, but cannot free him from the defects of his race nor from the difficulties of his unnatural position. There is a magnanimity, a physical daring, even an intellectual vigor, about him that is in every way excellent. But these are the qualities of a noble barbarian, and would not make up a highly civilized European. He does not possess the finer intellectual qualities, nor the moral sensibility to grapple with the intricate and complex problems of life that present themselves in his new environment.<sup>1</sup> When before the council he admits the lack of the softer arts, but he charges this to his military life, and not to his racial extraction. He is, in fact, everything that is noble and excellent as a Moor; but lacking in the finer graces and qualities of a Venetian. In short, Othello is simply of a lower type. Shakespeare evidently is of the same mind as Tennyson: "Better fifty years of Europe than a cycle of Cathay."

The play gives many evidences of the savage nature which cannot be restrained by his acquired virtues. Schlegel has remarked that "the mere physical force of passion puts to flight in one moment all his acquired and mere habitual virtues, and gives the upper hand

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Herford, Eversley *Shakespeare*, VIII, 289.

to the savage over the moral man.”<sup>1</sup> Othello lacks the mental poise and clear vision of a high nature. He possesses sturdy physical qualities, but lacks the finer moral powers. What Schlegel calls the “tyranny of the blood” asserts itself at every turn. When Iago works on his jealous imagination he completely collapses and falls in a swoon. When he sees Cassio talking with Iago, about Desdemona as he thinks, he wants to tear him in pieces at once. When troubled with the conviction of Desdemona’s unfaithfulness, he gets the letter ordering him from Cyprus, and when Desdemona expresses her pleasure at his recall, in the very presence of Lodovico he brutally strikes his wife. Then after killing Desdemona, and thinking he is rid of Cassio, Othello thinks he can go on as usual, and coolly appoints Iago his lieutenant. The strong and mighty warrior is but a child in the control of his passion, and a savage in his lack of moral sense. How different the noble Hamlet, who can refrain from killing the king at prayer, and whose conscience troubles him for unwillingly giving offence to Laertes.

It is manifest that in this drama Shakespeare is working on a special case that comes within a very large general principle. The province of dramatic art of course excludes that of generalization, and must necessarily be limited to a particular instance. But the larger principle upon which the dramatist is working is that of marital incompatibility, and to make out his contention he chooses a case that not only exhibits to the inner sense of those who observe but also exhibits to the outer sense of those who only see. Shakespeare has in this play first taken two persons joined in a mar-

<sup>1</sup> Schlegel, *Lectures on Dramatic Art and Literature*, Eng. trans., p. 402, cf. Furness, p. 432.

riage made incompatible in the first instance by their spiritual incongruities, but in order to make it appear to the eye as well as to the mind also joined in a diversity of race and color. This difference of color is doubtless intended by the dramatist merely to be a symbol of the mental and moral inferiority upon which the tragedy turns. Every Elizabethan playgoer would at once recognize Othello's blackness of visage as a mark of spiritual inferiority to the delicate whiteness of the fair maid of Venice. The contrast in color is only a sign and symbol of the deep and fundamental discrepancy in culture and spiritual character between Othello and his delicate wife. This it is that is the real cause of the conflict between the two, and that aggravates into tragedy the little incidents that between two kindred spirits would pass off with no more than a ripple on the surface of their married happiness.

That the difference of color is a real and not merely an imaginary source of trouble in the case of Othello may be further seen in the fact that in the same way he is continually getting into trouble with the other persons of the drama. As the play develops there is not a person of any prominence in the play with whom he does not come into conflict. His color, or the character due to his color, before the play closes puts him in opposition to all the leading persons of the play. Othello is indeed a Moor, a noble but a savage nature, a man out of touch with his surroundings, who is vainly trying to live his life among another people of a different color and higher ideals.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> It is unnecessary to spend time discussing the question whether Shakespeare thought of Othello as a negro. Not likely he made any clear distinction between the various black peoples. He gives Othello the "thick lips" of the negro, though all his other characteristics are Moorish rather than negro. Cf. quotations in Fur-

The difference of race, and hence of spiritual character, is that which disturbs the marriage of Othello and Desdemona, and leads to the difficulty with Iago. Professor Bradley has made little or nothing of this difference in his interpretation of the play, but in the matter of the personal relations of Othello with Desdemona he admits, though in a foot-note, that it has not been sufficiently realized. He says: "The effect of difference in blood in increasing Othello's bewilderment regarding his wife is not sufficiently realized. The same effect has to be remembered in regard to Desdemona's mistakes in dealing with Othello in his anger."<sup>1</sup> But this is not enough. The difference of blood is a factor in the situation of the play and the course of the plot. There may or may not be an equality of the races. It may be a mistake to regard one as inferior to another. But there is at least a difference, and a difference that renders them in some matters incompatible. The course of life as well as of this play presents abundant evidence that there is not enough common ground for a permanent and ethical marriage relationship between two races so different from one another. With such a difference there cannot be a sufficient harmony and frankness in concerns of the deepest mutual interest to overcome the difficulties sure to arise in a lifelong marriage. Such a marriage has almost fatal handicaps and embarrassments from the start. Iago, easily the cleverest and wisest person of the play,<sup>2</sup> saw this and planned to take a hideous advantage of it, both in his dealings ness on this subject, pp. 389-396, especially that from Hunter, p. 390.

<sup>1</sup> *Shakespearean Tragedy*, p. 193.

<sup>2</sup> Professor Bradley speaks of Iago as "a man ten times as able as Cassio or even Othello." (*Op. cit.*, p. 221.)

directly with Othello, and in his suggestions to Cassio.

The self-assurance of Othello when he saw that his elopement was discovered shows he did not appreciate the predicament he had got himself into. To Iago's suggestion that he go in and escape the officers sent to apprehend him, he replies with a rude self-confidence:

"Not I: I must be found.  
My parts, my title, and my perfect soul  
Shall manifest me rightly."

(I. ii. 35-37.)

He was bright enough to foresee opposition, and for this reason married secretly, but not far-seeing enough to appreciate the character of the resentment he would arouse. Even his long military career had not entirely eradicated his barbaric view of his relations to others, and, as we have seen from his dealings with Iago, had not implanted a high sense of honor.

It is only after Othello has his wife secure and is dispatched to Cyprus, that Iago reveals the second reason for his hatred. The matter, however, is of a strictly personal nature, affecting the honor of his wife, and therefore cannot be made known to Roderigo, and moreover cannot be entirely proven. But it serves to whet his revenge:

"I hate the Moor,  
And it is thought abroad, that 'twixt my sheets  
He has done my office. I know not if't be true,  
But I, for mere suspicion in that kind,  
Will do, as if for surely."

(I. iii. 410-14.)

Many critics are disposed to hold Othello innocent of this wrong, because the words of the play do not put it beyond doubt. So far as Emilia is concerned, however, her conversation with Desdemona clearly reveals

her as not invulnerable. (IV. iii.) It seems somewhat ungracious, inasmuch as there is no proof in the play, but many see in Othello's suspiciousness of women the stain of his own previous transgressions, and possibly with Emilia. It will not do, however, to conclude with Snider that Othello is really guilty of this offence, or to regard this as the main grievance of Iago, and that upon which the play turns. The main conflict between Othello and Iago undoubtedly is that outlined by Iago in the opening scene of the play. Though there is no direct proof of his guilt with Emilia, the cloud of suspicion certainly hangs over Othello all through the play, and unavoidably affects our estimate of his character. It apparently suits the dramatist's purpose not to remove the doubt, for it is mere suspicion upon which many of the conflicts of the play turns,—this among others. These suspicions, it is important to notice, all have to do with Othello's character and his ill-adjusted relations with his adopted fellow-citizens. The main conflict of the play, that between Othello and Iago, springs from well-founded charges, and the others from mere suspicions, but all alike have to do with Othello's relations with the people of Venice, and all alike show his inability to maintain the standards of their life.

## VI

Having now studied the two conflicts into which the barbaric nature of Othello led him, it is necessary to look at these same conflicts from the side of the other persons, and to try to understand especially the mind of Iago, and to follow the unfolding of his schemes as they affect Desdemona, and the development of the play. The condemnation of Iago has been so nearly

universal that it will be well to investigate his motives and his point of view with the utmost care.

No one now-a-days can think with Coleridge that Iago is a motiveless villain.<sup>1</sup> There is no doubt about his villainy, and as Macaulay long ago said he is the object of universal loathing. There is a sly and unscrupulous cunning about him that renders it impossible for us to sympathize with him in his schemes, and a dastardly and unrelenting furiousness about his pursuit of his end that makes him appear to love evil for its own sake, and that goes far beyond what any sense of justice could warrant. But it is one of those strange fatuities of that character study that neglects the narrative of a play that leads Professor Lewis Campbell to compare Iago unfavorably with Macbeth.<sup>2</sup> The murderer of Duncan had no such grievance as the destroyer of Othello. The grand style of Macbeth's execrable ambition has disguised the utter iniquity of his deeds. The enormity of a crime does not make it less criminal.

Various explanations have been offered by the few writers, and these quite recent, who have felt the necessity of accounting for the very apparent change in the attitude of Iago toward Othello. One suggests that the malignity of Iago in the latter part of the play is due to his consciousness of personal danger, and to save himself he turns to extremes of cruelty and revenge.<sup>3</sup> But the explanation that calls for most careful consideration is that offered by Professor Bradley in his *Shakespearean Tragedy*. The scant justice done by Professor Bradley to what he admits is the popular

<sup>1</sup> *Lectures on Shakespeare*, p. 388.

<sup>2</sup> *Tragic Drama*, by Lewis Campbell, p. 239.

<sup>3</sup> W. H. Hadow, in *Albany Review*, same *Living Age*, Sept. 12th, 1908, 258: 674-680.

view of Iago need not detain us longer than to say that his very popular statement of that view has by no means exhausted the depth of meaning it contains any more than the old popular form of the stories is to be taken as adequate for Shakespeare's versions. Leaving this aside, however, for the present with Professor Bradley's criticisms of other views, let us notice his own theories of Iago.

Professor Bradley's view seems to be that Iago is moved by envy and jealousy of others in better positions than himself. He says, "Whatever disturbs or wounds his sense of superiority irritates him at once; and in *that* sense he is highly competitive. This is why the appointment of Cassio provokes him. This is why Cassio's scientific attainments provoke him."<sup>1</sup> Again he says of Iago that "Othello's eminence, Othello's goodness, and his own dependence on Othello must have been a perpetual annoyance to him. At *any* time he would have enjoyed befooling and tormenting Othello."<sup>2</sup> And then he explains Iago's casting off the mask at this time by saying that "His thwarted sense of superiority wants satisfaction."<sup>3</sup>

But this explanation is too general and goes too far. If Iago is merely envious of Cassio, and feels that his sense of superiority is wounded by the promotion of Cassio, then for the same reason he should have been envious of Othello as well, for as Professor Bradley himself says, he is "a man ten times as able as Cassio or even Othello."<sup>4</sup> Up to this time Iago seems never to have been envious of Othello, but on the contrary served him as his faithful and willing "ancient," until passed over in the promotion of Cassio. He did

<sup>1</sup> *Shakespearean Tragedy*, p. 221. <sup>3</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 229.

<sup>2</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 228.

<sup>4</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 221.

not have a general sense of superiority and seems never to have thought of holding himself superior to those to whom he was by nature superior, such as Othello, but was only aggrieved when passed over for a promotion for which he stood in line, and for which a previous faithful and good record had qualified him. To admit that it was this that caused him to throw off the "mask" of his friendship for Othello is to admit that the change in the conduct of Iago is due to a grievance which he thought real, but which the critic thinks unreal. If that is granted then it is no longer a matter of throwing off a mask, but of working for revenge because of a fancied wrong. The drama is then no longer a drama of intrigue as that is commonly understood, but becomes a drama of revenge, which is a very different thing. Given the deed of Othello operating upon the character of Iago, and the drama becomes as contended the development of the deed and character of Othello.

There is no denying the fact that Iago was a very bad man. But he is a man, not a monster, as some would have us believe. It cannot well be maintained that he takes delight in evil for its own sake, though neither can it be denied that he has some traces of the Machiavellian villain in the diabolical nature of his revenge.<sup>1</sup> To show that Iago has grievances is to show that he has motives, and to have motives that the play recognizes is to be a Shakespearean rather than a Machiavellian villain. Iago is undoubtedly cruel and unscrupulous in the pursuit of his revenge, and perhaps toward the end of the play comes to take a grim delight in pushing the punishment of his enemies beyond the

<sup>1</sup> Professor Stoll has recently called attention to the Machiavellian characteristics of Iago, in an article on "Criminals in Shakespeare and in Science," in *Modern Philology*, Vol. X, pp. 55-80, 1912-13.

full measure of the offence, but even this does not make him a fiend incarnate. Iago launches his poisoned darts against none but those who have offended him, and who have stood in his way. His initial ambitions and hopes were legitimate and proper, but his relentless revenge on those who interfered was extreme and diabolical. Yet he is by no means such a villain as Macbeth or as Richard the Third, whose ambitions led them through the blood of all who stood in their way to the throne. Iago's malignity rests upon two deep causes of real offence given him by Othello. He is not in the first instance the aggressor, but the sufferer, and only resents and tries to avenge the injuries done him. To regard Iago as the arch-villain is to overlook the fact made so plain in the play that it was Othello that was the aggressor, and not Iago. But some are so constituted that they can never see the evil of an aggressive wrong, but are ready to condemn any person who refuses to be a victim of the nefarious practices of others.

To attempt to discover Iago's motives is not to justify him, or to try to palliate his wickedness. No real apology can be made for his character and conduct, though it is important to understand his mental state.<sup>1</sup> His motives can be claimed to be psychologically adequate as motives without admitting that they are morally sufficient or justifiable. If we are to continue to think of Shakespeare as a dramatic genius we must not first put one of his characters outside the human race by making him an impossible monster and then proclaim our admiration for the dramatist by declaring

<sup>1</sup> Under the title of "An Apology for the Character and Conduct of Iago," an attempt was made to set right our ideas of Iago in a volume entitled *Essays by a Society of Gentlemen at Exeter*, as long ago as 1796. Cf. Furness, pp. 408-9.

Iago a great creation. The play makes him a human being with human but evil motives, and his unscrupulous use of the dupe, Roderigo, shows his criminal heartlessness. Moreover, it must be freely declared that the punishment he meted out to Othello was undoubtedly out of all proportion to the offence committed. He could not forgive the injuries Othello's barbarism had unwittingly committed against him. But mercy, as Portia says in *The Merchant of Venice*,

"is an attribute to God himself;  
And earthly power doth then show likest God's  
When mercy seasons justice."

(IV. i. 205-7.)

For Iago to plague Othello to the murder of his wife and to his own death was to exact more than the utmost farthing and to worship the spirit of vengeance. Such Italian revenge becomes diabolical, and destroys whatever sympathy we might otherwise have for Iago. He is severe and unforgiving, and in trying to revenge the wrong done him undoubtedly commits a greater wrong. This is sufficient condemnation without attempting to take away his humanity by denying him any real motive. Though "honest" throughout his earlier life, yet when he was provoked and wronged he was as unforgiving and vengeful as a serpent. This phase of his character was a great surprise to those who knew him best, but still it is a conceivable disclosure or development.

Iago's plan of revenge was so comprehensive as to include all those who were concerned in the injuries he suffered:

"How? How? Let's see.  
After some time, to abuse Othello's ears  
That he is too familiar with his wife."

(I. iii. 418-420.)

This would at once feed fat his revenge on Othello, who was the direct agent in both his injuries; would enable him to strike at Desdemona whose interest in Cassio had lost him the lieutenancy; and at the same time would rid him of Cassio, whose promotion had thwarted his ambition. His boldness, fearlessness, and deceit were equal to the task, and would avail to use the gull, Roderigo, for his purpose.

The storm that struck the Venetians on their way to Cyprus also struck the Turks, and did more complete destruction than Othello's forces could have accomplished. This furnished Iago with all necessary freedom and opportunity to work out his intrigues upon the company. He opened his attack by inciting Roderigo further against Cassio, stirring up his jealousy by saying that Desdemona was already tiring of Othello and was even now in love with Cassio. Desdemona, he asserts, cannot much longer be infatuated with Othello, but must turn to one of her own race. "Her eye must be fed." She must have a man of a favorable appearance, which to them meant one of her own race. There is none more likely than her old friend, Cassio, who it must be acknowledged is "a very proper man." This wise observer further announces the very reasonable view that for a happy marriage there must be "loveliness in favor, sympathy in years, manners, and beauties; all which the Moor is defective in." (II. i. 262-3.) And Iago persuades the poor fool Roderigo that if Cassio is only out of the way, then he will undoubtedly be Desdemona's next choice.

As for Othello, there is no doubt that he dearly loved the gentle Desdemona, and was very proud of her. As Coleridge said, "Othello had no life but in Desdemona:—the belief that she, his angel, had fallen

from the heaven of her native innocence, wrought a civil war in his heart.”<sup>1</sup> He ought to love her; he had got the better of the bargain. Had he not loved her, he could not have been so easily put into distrust, and would not have been so moved by doubt. Indifference does not breed jealousy, and unconcern is not the mother of distrust. His passion was not so much jealousy as pride, for, as many writers have remarked, it was Iago who was essentially the jealous man.<sup>2</sup> It was his great affection that caused him to feel so deeply the stain of dishonor. He had not himself sought marriage until he had seen Desdemona, and even then she was half the wooer. He married her for the one good and sufficient reason that he had fallen in love, and had rather reluctantly given up the free life of the bachelor to take on himself the duties of matrimony. But love conquered his objections:

“For know Iago,  
But that I love the gentle Desdemona,  
I would not my unhoused free condition  
Put into circumscription, and confine,  
For the sea’s worth.”

(I. ii. 27-31.)

To put such a love into distrust, Iago rightly conceived that a long detour must be made, and Cassio must be made the means. The first step was to incite Roderigo to “find some occasion to anger Cassio” (II. i. 298-9), for “he’s rash, and very sudden in choler: and happily may strike at you.” At the same time Iago will exert himself to get Cassio drunk, for then he is “as full of quarrel, and offence As my young mistress’ dog.” (II. ii. 66-7.) The result of this will

<sup>1</sup> *Lectures on Shakespeare*, p. 393.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Heraud, quoted by Furness, pp. 88-9; Tennyson, *Memoir*, II. p. 292.

be that Othello will dismiss Cassio from the lieutenancy, and the coveted post will fall to Iago. To this end a holiday is proclaimed, and in a night of revelry and carousing Iago succeeds in making Cassio drunk. The scheme turns out better than he anticipated, for Cassio not only gets into trouble with Roderigo, but also with Montano, Othello's predecessor in the office of Governor of Cyprus, and is immediately dismissed by Othello.

Until now, Iago had apparently formulated no definite plan by which to make Othello jealous of Cassio. When he first conceived the idea he intended,

"After some time, to abuse Othello's ears,  
That he is too familiar with his wife."  
(I. iii. 419-420.)

With the fortunate turn he has now given to events, he devises a scheme for abusing Othello's ear. When Cassio comes to him in great distress because of his fall, and wants his kind offices, he advises him to entreat Desdemona to intercede for him with Othello: "Confess yourself freely to her: importune her help to put you in your place again. . . . This broken joint between you, and her husband, entreat her to splinter." (II. ii. 347-352.) His delight in this scheme Iago voices in words that show how fully he realizes the diabolical character of the plan. At the same time he reveals how fully he includes Desdemona in his revenge, as the instigator of his injuries:

"So will I turn her virtue into pitch,  
And out of her own goodness make the net,  
That shall en-mesh them all."  
(II. ii. 391-3.)

Not at once, but after the failure of Cassio's attempts to reinstate himself in the confidence of Othello,

Iago is appointed to the coveted lieutenancy. But so much has he given himself up to the consuming fire of revenge that even this does not appease his wrath. Though a belated vindication, this should have satisfied him, and the fact that it does not seems to mean either that there were other grievances still in his mind, or that he had learned to take delight in vengeance for its own sake. The truth seems to be that Iago did not yet think that justice had been meted out to Othello, for he had as yet suffered nothing for the alleged wrong with Emilia. The fact that Iago was still not satisfied when he had obtained the desired vindication for the slight in the promotion of Cassio seems to indicate the seriousness with which he looked upon the affair concerning his wife. The alternative of assuming him to be a very devil for vengeance seems less preferable, for it robs Iago of his human nature and the dramatist of his supreme humanity and common sense.

It has often been thought that too much good luck follows Iago's devices, and that accident and chance wait upon him too faithfully. Professor (Sir) Walter Raleigh says, very curiously, that "In *Othello* the chances were all against the extreme issue; at a dozen points in the story a slip or an accident would have brought Iago's fabric about his ears."<sup>1</sup> Professor Bradley, apparently possessed by the same thought, says that it "confounds us with a feeling . . . that fate has taken sides with villainy."<sup>2</sup> These statements, however, are but new forms of the mistaken conception that intrigue and not character rules in some of the plays of Shakespeare. Ulrici long ago

<sup>1</sup> Shakespeare, "English Men of Letters," Eversley edition, p. 274. London, 1909.

<sup>2</sup> *Shakespearean Tragedy*, p. 182.

stated this quite clearly concerning *Othello*: "The distinguishing peculiarity of our [this] drama consists in its being a tragedy of *intrigue*, whereas all Shakespeare's other tragedies are rather tragedies of *character*."<sup>1</sup> But there is no occasion to take *Othello* out from the main body of Shakespearean tragedy, for no less than the others it is a tragedy of character, but the forces and factors have been so subtle and complex that we have merely failed to unravel them. To regard *Othello* as a drama of *intrigue* would be to put it on a much lower plane of art than the other plays, and would also involve assigning to it a more pessimistic and hopeless view of life and of the world. For this readers and students are scarcely prepared.

It must be admitted sooner or later that the trouble is in the incongruous marriage of *Othello* and *Desdemona*. To try to suggest other ways out of the trouble than are to be found in the play itself is simply to try to undo Shakespeare. For *Othello* to strike down *Iago* at the bare suggestion of his wife's unfaithfulness, as Professor Raleigh intimates he should do, would not render the marriage of the two any more ideal or any less unnatural. It would merely have lengthened out the thread of *Othello*'s existence, and have afforded time other opportunities to plan his downfall. The hand of force cannot hold back moral necessities, nor can outer hindrances prevent the working of inner forces. In developing *Othello*'s passion and character into tragedy, Shakespeare was experimenting with it, and seeing how it would work out under the most unfavorable conditions. But to place it in favorable conditions where, perchance, it would

<sup>1</sup> *Shakespeare's Dramatic Art*, 1847, Eng. trans. in Furness, p. 434.

not have developed into tragedy would not have constituted a thorough study of this passion. The dramatist saw, what many critics do not see, that accident may give *form* to dramatic problems, and may hasten their evolution. But dramatic problems are not created by accidents, and are not solved by accidents. Tragedy must always deal with essential passion and must give only real solutions of the conflicts developed. Much wiser, then, is the view of Professor Herford, and much more in accordance with the spirit of the play: "Even the trickery of Iago, gross and clumsy as it is, and poorly as it would figure in a drama of intrigue, completely succeeds. Othello's love, in its complexity, its intensity, and its blindness, has the very quality of tragic passion."<sup>1</sup>

The situation, then, that the play presents is full of immense possibilities of trouble and sorrow. The relations of Othello and Desdemona are very delicate and exceedingly unstable, and keep them always in a very precarious position. The unnatural relationship of their marriage has not given Othello a secure hold on his wife's affections, and his previous relations with women have been such as to make him peculiarly susceptible to distrust. The difference of color between him and his wife is a matter at all times made prominent in the play, and has given him much uneasiness, and has rendered him exceedingly vulnerable, especially when a white man is involved in the doubt of his wife's fidelity. It would be a rare stroke of good fortune if these two were not to be disturbed in their marital relationships.

Nobody knew better than the clever Iago how fragile their relations were, and he proceeds at once to make

<sup>1</sup> Introduction to *Othello* in the Eversley *Shakespeare*, p. 289.

full use of his knowledge and his opportunity. He very gladly avails himself of the chance to use Cassio as a bait to entrap Othello, for it was he that had obtained the lieutenancy, and he was also suspected with Emilia. He therefore plans to suggest covertly to Othello that Cassio is altogether too friendly with Desdemona, and he goes so far as to say that she "repeals (recalls) him for her body's lust." In order to convince Othello beyond a doubt he arranges to let him see the two together:

" . . . myself, a while, to draw the Moor apart,  
And bring him jump, when he may Cassio find  
Soliciting his wife."

(II. ii. 418-420.)

Under the peculiar conditions of her marriage Desdemona was exceedingly unwise to manifest so much interest in Cassio. No matter if he had been her friend before her marriage and had indeed helped to bring the marriage about, she should have realized how fragile were her relations with her husband. It never seems to have entered her simple mind, however, that her relations with her Moorish husband needed any solicitous care on her part. Iago's plot to destroy their marriage was exceedingly bold and clumsy, and as Professor Herford has said, "ill-calculated . . . to wreck a normal marriage; but it is launched against a relationship so delicately poised that a touch suffices for its ruin."<sup>1</sup> Othello, with only the training of the "tentied field," and Desdemona with none but that gained in her father's home and under his tuition, were ill-fitted to maintain in peace a marriage that required the most consummate care and the most delicate balancing. It is doubtful if Desdemona was any more able

<sup>1</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 291.

for this difficult task than Othello. Her interest in another man, notwithstanding the fact that he was an old friend, was quite as dangerous an enemy to their peace as Othello's willingness to listen to "honest Iago." Desdemona's childlike wilfulness was well matched by Othello's Moorish dullness.

Much has been written on the excellence of Iago's art of suggestion. The subtlety, the cleverness, the villainy of his schemes are in strange contrast with the tragic perversity of Othello in being suspicious of his wife and unsuspicious of Iago and everybody else. The pathetic thing is that Othello persisted in believing lies, and could not be made to believe the truth. The disparity between him and his wife, that rendered a complete union of hearts and minds impossible, was the cause of his suspicion and distrust. This, and not the mere circumstances of their lives, was the real source of the tragedy. And the external unlikeness of race and color of the old story has been transformed by Shakespeare into but the dramatic sign and symbol of an inner, deeper, and spiritual incompatibility.

This is all in accordance with Shakespeare's dramatic method to be seen in other plays as well. He simply followed in this play the same plan he adopted in other plays when he transformed the old romance of Othello by making the external disparity of the old story over into an inner incongruity of spirit. It was the dramatist's practice in adapting earlier dramatic material not to change the entire meaning of the story or play, but to widen and deepen it, and give it more vital and moral significance. This he did in *Romeo and Juliet*, *The Merchant of Venice*, *Hamlet*, and many other plays. The tragedies of life are not due primarily to unlikeness of favor, or to any other external difference,

but to irreconcilability of spirit and of aims and ideals. In the case of *Othello*, if the difference had been one of complexion only, and no deeper, it would have taken more than the withering taunts of Iago to unsettle its peace. But back of the color was the deeper and fundamental conflict of spirit that was the real object of Iago's incitement. Iago made full use of the diversity between the two when urging Roderigo into his service, and shows that he recognizes not only the diversity in "favor," but also that of "years, manners, and beauties." When inciting Othello, however, he makes reference only to the one that could be seen with the eye, for Othello was a man of the senses:

"I may fear  
Her will, recoiling to her better judgment,  
May fall to match you with her country forms  
And happily repent."

(III. iii. 276-9.)

The Moor's lack of the essential elements of culture and civilization has not been sufficiently observed. Othello is not a man of intellect, but lives his life almost wholly in the senses. When Iago presents to him indications of Desdemona's wrong-doing, he asks at once to be given "ocular proof." He can believe only what he sees. Evidence other than "ocular" means nothing to him. It is for this reason that the evidence of the handkerchief appeals so strongly to him. Against this evidence of the senses, all the fondness, the sweetness, and the tenderness of Desdemona pass for nothing. Perfect frankness, the very quality Desdemona lacked, might have overcome his suspicion. But her manifest embarrassment at the accusation only added fuel to the fires of distrust, and he adds: "My mind misgives." (III. iv. 106.) The two lacked harmony and com-

munity of feeling from the outset, and the process of time could scarcely fail to bring about that rupture that would be tragedy.

In order to deceive Othello it is only necessary for Iago to confuse his senses. His masterpiece of dissimulation was the interview with Cassio concerning Bianca, in which Iago contrives to make Othello think the conversation is about Desdemona. As only seeing is believing to Othello, the entrance of Bianca convinces Othello beyond a doubt that Cassio is a man not to be trusted. The pity of it is that Othello cannot believe the very one he most loves and should most completely trust. He is afraid to expostulate with Desdemona lest her beauty deprive him of resolution. Like the half-savage he is, he cannot let her speak for herself, for he has concluded she is guilty, and he cannot endure contradiction. Naturally, Desdemona cannot give him "ocular proof" of her innocence, and nothing less will satisfy him. He therefore concludes to kill her at once, "this night," and only at Iago's suggestion defers instant action, in order to carry out a more perfect retribution by strangling her in the bed she has polluted.

Yet this is the man that on certain levels of life and under certain conditions had wonderful self-control. Apparently to all his old friends his nobility and self-control were among his outstanding characteristics. Professor Bradley has remarked that "He has greater dignity than any other of Shakespeare's men,"<sup>1</sup> and it may be remarked very much greater dignity than his Julius Cæsar. But his recall from Cyprus, leaving Cassio in his place, serves as the occasion of a complete loss of self-control. When Desdemona shows

<sup>1</sup> *Shakespearean Tragedy*, p. 190.

pleasure at the prospect of return to Venice, Othello mistakes her meaning, and the elemental passion in him is aroused to storm and fury. His rage is unbounded, and so completely masters him that he bursts all self-restraint, and strikes his wife, calling her "Devil," and roaring at her, "Out of my sight." (IV. i. 271, 274.)

Such barbaric fury had never been seen in him before, and was entirely unsuspected even by his friends. Lodovico asks in amazement:

"Is this the noble Moor, whom our full senate  
Call all in all sufficient? Is this the nature  
Whom passion could not shake? Whose solid virtue  
The shot of accident, nor dart of chance  
Could neither graze, nor pierce?"

(IV. i. 295-9.)

For the second time, then, Othello has proved himself deficient in the high virtue of self-command required of him in his adopted life in Venice and in the lofty position he held in the state. His treatment of his wife on this occasion is of a piece with his treatment of his "ancient." Both were brutal and inexcusable violations of the rights and dignity of others, but one only ended in physical violence. With all his military prowess and power of command over others, Othello had not acquired the more civilized virtues of self-command and respect for others.

Nothing could now stop the fury of Othello's anger. He could endure affliction, sores, shames, poverty, and captivity; he could even endure to be "The fixed figure for the time of scorn, To point his slow, and moving finger at"; but he says he could not bear "where I have garner'd up my heart . . . to be discarded thence!" (IV. ii. 64-70.) He could not endure to be discarded by the one he loved. To be chosen by Desdemona with

her eyes open, and then to be cast off for another, a countryman of her own, was too much of a disappointment for him to bear. Such humiliation in Venice he will not endure, and it is no surprise to hear Iago say that Othello plans to quit Venice for his own native Mauritania with his bride, and there once more his royal blood will be acknowledged and honored.

The modern critics of Shakespeare have not been satisfied with calling Othello's passion jealousy. Coleridge was one of the first to dissent from the old accusation.<sup>1</sup> It is very certain his passion is not the same in kind as that of Leontes in *The Winter's Tale*. There is no creeping suspicion. He does not weave up the web of his distrust from material of his own contriving. It never dawns upon him that there is any ground for suspicion until the suggestions of Iago. It is not jealousy, then, but as Professor Bradley says, "It is the wreck of his faith and his love" that move him.<sup>2</sup> Misfortune he could endure, but not dishonor. To be cast off by Desdemona for one who was his inferior, his own lieutenant, was an affront to his pride that was too much to bear. He that fetched his blood from men of royal seige could not endure to be made inferior to his own lieutenant. Othello was a very proud man, and boasted his royal lineage. He had no suspicions that Desdemona could ever hold any one in higher esteem than himself, and the suggestion that she was false with Cassio was an intimation to him that her heart was not satisfied with the dignity his name had given her.

The thought that she was not satisfied with him, a husband of royal descent, was a new thing to him. It

<sup>1</sup> *Lectures on Shakespeare*, pp. 381, 386, 393, 477, 529.

<sup>2</sup> *Shakespearean Tragedy*, p. 194.

involved the inferiority of himself and his race, and this he could not endure. No other person had ever dared to do an act that suggested in any way his inferiority, and he would not take it even from his wife. All his resentment was kindled, and he sprang to his own defence, and even in the presence of the Venetian envoy he would strike down such an insult. It was not jealousy, and not mere wounded honor, that enraged Othello, but outraged pride. It was not Desdemona who had brought dignity and position to him by the marriage. It was he that had conferred dignity and royalty upon her. He could not endure any act that disparaged the high dignity of his birth, and made him to be the inferior of a common Venetian. For this he was never able to forgive Cassio, and in time promoted Iago to the lost lieutenancy, for he at least would never challenge the dignity of his commander by any act like that of Cassio.

## vii

And now for the conclusion of the whole matter. Shakespeare's final scenes are of equal importance with his first scenes. In the opening scenes he sets before his audience the various persons who enter into the conflict, and indicates the lines of their collisions. In the concluding scenes he draws the whole matter to a moral and dramatic culmination that is in effect his judgment upon the problems of the play. Here he disentangles the various threads that he has woven into the complexity of the plot, and in so doing gives his verdict upon the merits of the conflict. In no play is it more important to observe the outcome and the destiny assigned to the persons of the drama than in

*Othello.*

Even before the conclusion of the fourth act Iago's schemes begin to be discovered. Roderigo is the first to get his eyes open, and this makes it necessary for Iago to use the last desperate chance to get rid of both him and Cassio. Othello, too, must be kept on the rack, and must be kept from suspecting the plots against him. There is no such thing as turning back now, and indeed Iago gives no evidence of regret at having gone so far, or of a desire to retrace his steps. He is whole-hearted in his villainy, and only desires the fulfilment of his plans. His persuasive craftiness has kept both Roderigo and Cassio unconsciously serving him, while they are led toward their own undoing. When he has got all the service they can render him, he adroitly turns them upon each other. No tears need be shed, however, over the sick fool, Roderigo, for this gentleman, when he could not get Desdemona for his wife, gave himself and his money up to an attempt to corrupt her as the wife of Othello. Cassio, however, has been the more or less innocent victim of the friendship of Othello and the envy of Iago, and the dramatist makes him survive all the intrigues of his enemy, and at last places him in the governorship of Cyprus as the successor of Othello.

With the austerity of a judge the dramatist has Othello carry out the sentence of destruction on his wife and on himself. The Moor's ferocious passion arms him to execute his vengeance upon Desdemona. With coolness, but with heavy sorrow, he enters the bed-chamber of his wife, to destroy her whose supposed transgression had ruined his happiness and almost his life. The wild-beast fury of his anger has exhausted itself, and gives way to a calm and steady purpose to

carry out unflinchingly his “great revenge.” Othello is able now to approach his sleeping wife, and charge her to her face with unfaithfulness, and warn her to make preparation for her death. He is more like a heathen sacrificer than an assassin, and has no more compunctions about his task than the priests in the sacrifices of the religion of his fathers. He is to purge Desdemona from her sins, and perhaps purify her in her death. Against such convictions the beautiful innocence and pitiful pleadings of his Venetian bride are all in vain, and this Moorish giant hardens his heart for the sacrifice. This great soldier, who had once taken by the throat and smitten “a malignant, and a turban’d Turk” (V. ii. 427) now with the same strong hands and remorseless soul stifles the wife of his bosom. But in her death he quite as surely crushes out his own hopes, and cannot long survive the foul deed.

Poor Desdemona! In marrying Othello she little thought she was committing her all to a man who on mere suspicion would not hesitate to take her life. But the girlish creature could not be expected to know the ways of other peoples. Having chosen Othello without her father’s consent, she must now abide by the fatal decision. She is innocent and lovely, but is wanting in experience, and in open-mindedness and transparent honesty. She had deceived her father in marrying Othello; she had deceived Othello himself about the handkerchief; and now in her dying hour she would shield her husband from his crime by deceitfully declaring she had done it herself. But Othello, with his free and open nature, as from the beginning when he was willing to be found, will not have it so, and bluntly owns the deed. Is there any wonder he thought her deceiving him when she protested her innocence in the

face of what appeared to him most certain evidence of her guilt? What he knew of her had not prepared him to believe her against all others, or fortified him against thinking her deceitful.

Critics have been loath to admit any wrong-doing in Desdemona. Though carried out in deception, her claim that she was the cause of her own death was no doubt prompted by a spirit of the most exalted and most devoted self-sacrifice. Her self-accusation was the index of her devotion to her husband. Recognizing this, and other good traits, critics have lauded her excellences, and one has called her "the most loveable of Shakespeare's women."<sup>1</sup> Professor Raleigh pictures her as all but perfect, having only a few trifling and insignificant faults, and no vices, and even these are lost to sight in her last triumphant, though tragic hours. He speaks of her "as a saint,"<sup>2</sup> and says that "Desdemona and Othello are both made perfect in the act of death."<sup>3</sup> Professor Bradley speaks in equally strong terms when he says: "She tends to become to us predominantly pathetic, the sweetest and most pathetic of Shakespeare's women, as innocent as Miranda and as loving as Viola, yet suffering more deeply than Cordelia or Imogen."<sup>4</sup>

This, however, is again to refuse to see what the play itself presents directly. It is to form our own opinion of Desdemona without respect to what the play asserts and without regard to the judgment of the dramatist as shown in the destiny he assigns to her. Her faults stand out in the play so clearly that he who runs may read, but he who only fancies may conceiv-

<sup>1</sup> Rose, quoted in Furness, p. 429.

<sup>2</sup> *Shakespeare*, p. 271.

<sup>3</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 274.

<sup>4</sup> *Shakespearean Tragedy*, p. 203.

ably miss them. Her shortcomings cannot be glossed over, as has been attempted by the writers mentioned; but on the other hand it is not necessary to let them crowd out of view her many excellences. Some writers, such as Heraud and Snider, have probably unduly magnified her weakness. A true criticism will depend on the play itself for the facts and for the inferences. With all her beauty and devotion, and with all the many charms of character she possesses, nevertheless, the fact cannot be ignored that her wilfulness, her indiscretion, and her romantic impulsiveness were dangerous qualities, and in the peculiar conditions of her marriage with Othello it was these that worked out her undoing. Under other conditions they might not have developed into anything serious, but it was the art of Shakespeare to place her in conditions that would show the essential character of her mind and bring out her passion. Her relations with Othello were such conditions, and her character was soon shown as one that would not disdain to use her influence with him to reward her favorites, and to upset the traditions of military advancement. There need be little surprise, then, that she loses the confidence of her husband. And with Othello as her husband, this was to sow the seeds of tragedy.

It would be easy to make too much of her little "fibs," especially of that about the handkerchief. But her innocent self-blackening as she lay on her death-bed was a kind of perverseness. Her whole tone was apologetic for her husband, and indicated an unconscious appreciation of the fact that all her life with him was false and unnatural. It is only to show this trait of character as belonging to her family to observe as Lloyd has done that the punishment falls upon her

father as well as upon her. Brabantio no doubt was the first "to belie his own daughter's chastity" as Lloyd remarks,<sup>1</sup> but he too was punished. Not having been true to herself in the beginning, it was not to be expected that she should always be regarded as true to her husband. Her continued interest in Cassio betrayed unconsciously the unsatisfied spiritual union with Othello. She thought she was "Subdued even to the very quality" of her lord; but a marriage that calls for either one to be "subdued" to the other is not an equal marriage, and is in constant danger. There were so many obstacles to a natural and happy marriage between Othello and Desdemona, that it is very doubtful if any Iago was really needed to foment an internal conflict sooner or later. It would be only a most fortunate turn of events or of chance if such a marriage were to escape disaster.

The ease with which evidence to refute Iago is obtained after the death of Desdemona proclaims the fatalism that dogged Othello's steps. Emilia has but to tell what she knows about the handkerchief, and that ghost is slain. The part-confession of Iago, and the explanations of Cassio, fully dissolve the remaining evidence into nothing and convince Othello that he has been grievously duped. But in spite of his marriage, Othello had no real union with Desdemona, and did not enter in any way into the more intimate life of her spirit. Othello as a Moor lived in real isolation in Venice, and nowhere in the play had he any bosom friends. He had no companions except his own under-officers, and now even Iago appears as his friend only to serve his turn upon him. He was admired and honored as a soldier by the Venetians, by Iago as well

<sup>1</sup> Furness, p. 80.

as by Brabantio, but nowhere was received as one of themselves except by the ill-fated Desdemona. Hence Othello could not gain from others the evidence to refute Iago, for he was not on sufficiently intimate terms with any.

It is to Othello's credit that his grief at his fatal error is unbounded, and he expresses himself in what is probably the most passionate self-reproach in Shakespeare. He nobly accepts the responsibility as his own, and condemns himself for it all, even forgetting in his self-loathing to attach any blame to Iago. He recognizes it as his own tragedy, not blaming Desdemona in the least. She had joined her life to his, and so shared his fate, but the two were in no such manner co-agents in the tragedy as were Antony and Cleopatra. We pity Desdemona and we pity Othello, scarcely knowing which to pity most, for to both the whole thing was a mistake rather than a crime. But it was primarily Othello's mistake, as the naming of the play implies. The greater age and experience, and presumably the greater wisdom, must make Othello chiefly responsible for the tragedy. As we think it all over, Othello's many excellent qualities and his undoubted devotion to the fair Desdemona come to our mind, and we cannot condemn him as bitterly or think of him as harshly as he thinks of himself:

"O, cursed, cursed slave!  
Whip me, ye devils,  
From the possession of this heavenly sight:  
Blow me about in winds, roast me in sulphur,  
Wash me in steep-down gulfs of liquid fire.  
Oh, Desdemon! dead Desdemon: dead. Oh, Oh!"  
(V. ii. 339-344.)

When it was all over, Othello came to a clearer vision, and saw the elements of tragedy that had entered into

his marriage, and saw that these were nothing else than his own personal and racial character and his own conduct. He begged that explanation might be made, and with infinite pathos besought his friends not to think unduly hard of him, for he had meant well:

"I pray you in your letters,  
When you shall these unlucky deeds relate,  
Speak of me, as I am. Nothing extenuate,  
Nor set aught down in malice.  
Then must you speak,  
Of one that lov'd not wisely, but too well:  
Of one, not easily jealous, but being wrought,  
Perplexed in the extreme."

(V. ii. 413-420.)

This should rid even the harshest critic of speaking any condemnation, and bespeak for Othello the fullest measure of sympathy and pity. We respect him all the more, and are the more convinced of the sincerity of his love for Desdemona, from the fact that he cannot endure to prolong his own life after he has slain his "sweet love."

## VIII

The "moral" of Cinthio's novel cannot be taken off-hand as the moral of Shakespeare's play. The dramatist had a way of infusing his own dramatic purpose into stories already devoted to a quite different aim. Many differences are to be noticed between the novel and the play. In the romance, Desdemona meets death at the hand of Iago, by arrangement with Othello,—a more gruesome and more unlikely fate than that assigned by Shakespeare. If Desdemona is to be killed at all, and by the conventions of the tragedy of the day this seems inevitable, then it should be by the

one with whom she had the most vital conflict. This person was undoubtedly no other than Othello himself, for it is her marriage with him that is the real fatality. In order to emphasize this, Shakespeare has greatly changed her relations with Iago, and has made much more prominent than Cinthio her relations with Othello. Consistently with this change in point of view, the dramatist must change also her executioner, and accordingly gives this horrible task to her husband. The play is Othello's play, and the chief conflict is with his wife. Othello must therefore work out to the bitter end the collision which he began.

In the romance, again, Othello is banished, and in the end is discovered and put to death by Desdemona's kinsmen. But this improperly regards and treats him as a criminal. Othello was not a criminal, for he did not plan the harm of any one, and was not distinctly conscious of wronging Desdemona in the marriage, and even in her death he thought he was only undoing a wrong. His remorse comes from seeing his mistake, and is not a moral repentance for a great and recognized crime. He had scarcely thought of marriage with Desdemona at all, much less did he deliberately plan an elopement, until her own words gave him a hint. But as he was much older and more experienced, he virtually took advantage of her youth and innocence, and, moreover, defied both her father and the custom of the state. If the marriage was a failure it was he that made it such, and he should be the avenger of the wrong upon himself. The distinctive yet barbaric qualities that made his marriage fail were the very qualities that also made it impossible for him to survive the failure.

The dramatist makes Cassio, the innocent object of

Desdemona's concern and the innocent means of offence to Iago, very properly survive and succeed to the governorship. He had both good and bad qualities, but at no time contrived against the welfare or life of any. There is nothing in the play to make us think that he sought to dispossess Iago in accepting the position of lieutenant to Othello. Even by the admission of Iago, he was "a very proper man," and though inexperienced in war, he was educated for high military positions, and had the confidence of the senate, and was chosen to succeed Othello once the pressing danger from the Turks was past. Into his hands as such Iago was committed at the close of the play for torture and punishment for his part in the catastrophe. The romance of Cinthio represents Iago as put to death, but Shakespeare evidently thought his intrigues were not without cause, if not without justification, and left it to Cassio to determine his punishment.

From this conclusion of the play, it seems impossible to escape the conviction that according to Shakespeare intrigue was only the outer form of the tragedy, not its essence. At bottom, as with all the plays of Shakespeare, it was a tragedy of character. Like that of Romeo and Juliet the new marriage was subject from the first to an external conflict, but unlike Romeo and Juliet it also had from the outset a deep internal dissension that finally was the cause of its disruption. The sweet and pure love of Romeo and Juliet could rise above the rivalry of their contending houses, and in the end managed to resolve the age-long conflict. But the essential conflict of Othello and Desdemona was emphasized by every difficulty in their lives, and the tragic end points the moral of the danger of such incongruous marriages.

Iago is therefore not the cause of the tragedy, which lies deeper in the unnatural union of two such diverse spirits as Othello and Desdemona. The theme of the play is not the manner in which the happiness of a newly-wedded pair can be destroyed by intrigue and lies, but the subject of the play is the vain attempt of a Moor, noble but barbaric, to live the life of a Venetian, as the husband of a Venetian maid. His marriage with Desdemona is the occasion of difficulty with one of his subordinate officers, and this in turn reacts upon his married relationships and destroys him. The trouble with him was that he was essentially uncivilized. Surrounded by all the forms and institutions of culture he remained barbaric. In the midst of the highest civilization he retained the rude instincts of his fathers. Possessed of the highest intellectual training that the military life could give he was yet ungoverned by reason but by passion. Othello had enjoyed the advantages of Venice, but he had not attained to its level of civilization. He had acquired the forms but had not achieved the moral standards of Venetian culture.

Shakespeare is evidently trying to show that civilization at bottom consists of moral culture. Othello had intellectual ability, he had acquaintance with the ideals of civilization, and yet he remained at heart a barbarian. He had not developed the high sense of honor and right that constitutes true culture. He was lacking in the moral sense that alone distinguishes barbarism and civilization. His honor had not kept pace with his culture, and his moral nature had not been trained as much as his mind. Lacking the civilized moral nature the instruments of culture and the opportunities of Venice became for him only the means of his own destruction.

This is the character of some of the great tragedies of men and of nations. Intellectual training, even the highest education, does not make either a man or a nation civilized. A culture that has no moral basis, but is built on intellectual attainments, is not true civilization at all. An unmoral civilization is only barbarism, and a culture that has no sense of honor is only savagery. Not having moral discernment, it does not recognize its own brutality, but like Othello boasts of its superior nature. Othello had acquired enough Venetian culture to demand the highest honor of those about him, but had not attained the moral character that would extend the same honor to them. Though baptized he had not acquired the Christian moral virtues, and the grace of giving only what he would take. He was still essentially barbaric; he was not thoroughly Christian.

There is no doubt that it was the opinion of the dramatist that Othello's inability to rise to a real moral character was due in large part to his inferior nature. Othello was morally dull and obtuse because he was a Moor. Without the deep moral sense of the civilized nations, Othello is unable to bear up under the weight of the higher requirements of life in his adopted city. He has brought with him his lower Moorish nature, and it will not bear the strain. He has attained the intellectual but has failed to acquire the moral elements of civilization, and his pride and ambition destroy him. Under the weight of cultivated life, two classes of persons inevitably fail; those of a lower type who destroy themselves with the instruments of culture, and the defective of the same type who are the criminal class. Shakespeare has many studies of persons of the latter class, but only one of the former, namely, Othello.

There need be no quarrel with Shakespeare about his views of race inequality. In the days of the opening up of the new world, and of the discovery of new peoples in the old, the European nowhere found evidence of any race the equal of those on his own continent. Shakespeare himself probably had little or no acquaintance with non-European races, but drew his conclusions about race inferiority from what we might now regard as insufficient evidence. Nevertheless, except for those who reason from *a priori* grounds, the world is still waiting for evidence of the equality of the races. The doctrine of equality seems a splendid and noble thing, provided your daughter is already safely married to one of your own race. It is quite possible, of course, that difference does not mean inequality, but difference is almost as much a barrier to a happy marriage. For the interpretation of the drama, at any rate, we must let Shakespeare have his way, and permit him to infer that Othello's fatal shortcomings are due to his Moorish blood. Perhaps with a dusky bride in Mauritania Othello might have been not only a great general, but a happy and unsuspicuous husband. But in Venice he met only disaster.

In every way Shakespeare has greatly enlarged the meaning of Cinthio's novel. The romance draws the lesson that Desdemona is a warning to Italian ladies not to "wed a man whom nature and habitude of life estrange from us."<sup>1</sup> Quite different is the dramatist's meaning. Shakespeare's larger theme is not the ill-assorted marriage of Othello and Desdemona, but the sad career of the Moor, Othello, as an ill-adjusted citizen of Venice, who because of his inferior nature gets into fatal difficulties with his Venetian subordinate

<sup>1</sup> Eng. trans. in Furness, p. 384.

and with his Venetian wife. The fatal marriage is but one of his difficulties, though it is the most absorbing in interest and the most tragic.

We all sincerely pity Othello, because of his inherent nobleness. He did naught in malice, as he wished none would do to him. But in the intricate and trying relations of his adopted life in Venice, and especially of his marriage with the fairest of Venetian maidens, he was "perplexed in the extreme," and gave way under the strain. His barbaric passion overcame him, and unable to recover himself, he went forward to his wife's and his own destruction. His primitive spiritual nature was not equal to the life of the highest civilization. His rude nobleness could not meet the demands of a finer moral culture, and he went down to defeat. But we do not condemn him, for his motive was not evil. We only pity him, and weep over the fate of both Othello and his Venetian bride.



KING LEAR:  
A TRAGEDY OF DESPOTISM



## CHAPTER V

### KING LEAR:

A TRAGEDY OF DESPOTISM

#### I

THE play of *King Lear* has probably evoked from readers and critics alike more definite appreciation of the play as a whole and more dissent from certain phases of the development of the plot than any other of the great plays of Shakespeare. As a work of dramatic art, and as a portrayal of the intensest human passion, the play has been accorded unstinted praise. The tremendous passions of the various persons, and their ungoverned indulgence, have given a titanic strength to the drama that all have readily felt, and that critics have said cannot be reproduced by any actors. The supreme artistic skill displayed by the dramatist in the construction of the mighty play has compelled all to stand in awe at his unparalleled genius. The acknowledged improbability of the action has not detracted from the full recognition of the intense human probability of the passion. Perhaps more than any other Shakespearean play, the plot seems framed for the portrayal of the passions, rather than the passions for the plot. The passions of both plot and underplot are intensely human, and each helps to make the other appear more dramatically real.

But there has not been such unanimity concerning Shakespeare's conduct of the narrative. Beginning with Doctor Johnson, there has been a strong inclination, much more than is the case with other plays, to doubt the instinct and judgment of the dramatist in the treatment of the characters in relation to the plot. The changes made by Shakespeare in the story, these critics think, are a serious departure from the usual good dramatic judgment of the author. The alteration he made in the story of Cordelia, giving her a tragic ending, they think, is a lapse from the justice and appropriateness that ordinarily mark his moral judgment. For almost two centuries, therefore, Shakespeare's conclusion to the story was repudiated, and other versions substituted by all great actors. It is only quite recently that in this and in other matters public opinion has come round to the dramatist's verdict, and restored the true Shakespearean versions, though still not without the misgivings of many.

There has been little question, however, about the dramatic relations of the various persons to one another, though the theme of the play, or the meaning of the story as a whole, has often been misconceived. Everybody understands the relations that exist between Lear and his daughters, but a mistake is frequently made in thinking that the theme is the ingratitude of the daughters, and the consequent suffering on the part of their father. We are only beginning, however, to display a confidence in Shakespeare, and to take his statements on such matters as all but final. In all the various editions for which he can in any way be responsible the play is named after the king himself. The story is primarily the story of King Lear, and only incidentally the story of the daughters. The quartos

of 1608 both call it *The True Chronicle Historie of the Life and Death of King Lear and his three Daughters*; but in the folio of 1623 the name of the king alone appears in the title, which reads *The Tragedie of King Lear*. The reference to the Chronicle History has disappeared, and the daughters are no longer mentioned in the title. This is in accordance with the true theme of the play, which portrays primarily King Lear in the mental and moral imbecility that developed with his growing habit of despotism, and only secondarily the tragic effects of this despotism in the ingratitude of his daughters.

The parallel action of the Duke of Gloucester and his sons helps to make the main dramatic action clear, and to emphasize the part of Lear himself. But it complicates the plot to such an extent that many see in the play very grievous faults of construction. It may be said, however, that what tends to make the main theme more prominent, and to reflect light upon it, cannot really interfere with the unity of the whole or weaken its general effect.

The discussion of the double story has long been carried on, but no better defence has been made than by Schlegel. After speaking of the resemblances and the contrasts between the plot and the underplot, he says that the additional case of trouble between father and children portrayed in the Gloucester story adds imaginative probability to the Lear story, by leaving the impression that those were the days of foolish parents and ungrateful children. They are both unusual and unnatural. "But two such unheard of examples taking place at the same time have the appearance of a great commotion in the moral world; the picture becomes gigantic and fills us with such alarm

as we should entertain at the idea that the heavenly bodies might one day fall from their appointed orbits.”<sup>1</sup> It would seem that in *King Lear* the dramatist was not only working out his views of individual human life, but that now at last he was definitely working on a world view, and had passed from the individual to the universal order.

With this in mind, it would seem to be a great mistake to resign ourselves, as some do, to the conception that the play is an enigma, and that it is impossible to justify the dramatist in his modifications of the original plot. Many critics do not believe the play is or is intended to be a solution of the problem presented, but are content, with Professor Dowden, to speak of “the moral mystery, the grand inexplicableness of the play.”<sup>2</sup> The same writer consoles himself in this attitude of mind by saying in the manner of a realist that “If life proposes inexplicable riddles, Shakespeare’s art must propose them also.”<sup>3</sup>

But a mere portrayer of human life as he sees it, Shakespeare refuses to be. His grasp of life’s problems is too firm, and his insight too clear, to let his readers long think that he regarded life as a riddle. Life did not seem an enigma to the men of his generation. In those “spacious times,” with curious and wonderful new worlds opening continually to their astonished minds, life may have been a task, but it was not a puzzle. In those days, poets and philosophers alike were offering all sorts of solutions of life and its problems, and it is not likely that Shakespeare stood apart from his age. It may or may not be that the

<sup>1</sup> *Lectures on Dramatic Art and Literature*, English trans., p. 412.

<sup>2</sup> *Shakspere—His Mind and Art*, p. 265, 13th edition.

<sup>3</sup> *Op. cit.* p. 258.

greatest of the poets was able to unravel the tangle of existence, but it is more than likely that he tried to do so, and that he regarded his drama as more than a mere statement of the problem.

## II

The play is clearly Lear's story. It has been thought by some that the Gloucester story is the first thread of the drama.<sup>1</sup> Though Gloucester rather than Lear participated in the opening conversation, it is Lear that is the subject, and it is Lear's action out of which everything develops. Lear's division of his kingdom is the first act recorded, and is the subject of the opening words of Kent and Gloucester, as Lear and his daughters come upon the stage. Apparently the division of the kingdom has already been decided upon, and all that remains is for the king to announce its actual accomplishment. But Lear has kept his purpose dark, and no one, not even Kent, can tell what principle shall govern in the division. It is suspected, however, by Gloucester that Lear will be influenced by the affection he bears his several daughters and their husbands.

As soon as he enters Lear proceeds to unfold his "darker purpose" that he has not yet made known. All three daughters, it is likely, have known of his intention, and eagerly awaited the division. Calling for a map he announces that he has made the division into three parts, but that he has not yet determined to which of his daughters to give each part. Apparently he has not made an equal division, though from his words to Albany and Cornwall it may be inferred

<sup>1</sup> Snider, *op. cit.*

that two of the parts are substantially equal. This is later made clear when he tells Regan her portion is

"No less in space, validity, and pleasure,  
Than that conferr'd on Goneril."

(I. i. 80-1.)

But the third division reserved for Cordelia was "more opulent" than that given to her two sisters. Thus would he show his preference for Cordelia. The other two had long been aware of his partiality, as Goneril later reminds Regan, "He always loved our sister most." (I. i. 298-9.)

Lear's division of the kingdom is generally considered a mere whim, and evidence of his fantastic character.<sup>1</sup> Such a policy of favoritism could result only in jealousy and strife, and in a primitive state of society possibly in civil or tribal war. Even if the principle of division had been good, the scheme itself was bad, and with two such queens as Goneril and Regan, there would surely have been trouble. But with his foolish plan for the division, the fiercest kind of conflict was altogether likely.

Though Lear would seem to divide the realm according to the love his several daughters had for him, his real intention was to make the largest gift to Cordelia, whom he thought loved him most, and from whom he expected the greatest returns of gratitude. He expected, of course, that she would prove the one who loved him most. There was but slight desire on his part to abnegate himself, but he had instead a strong though unconscious desire to exalt himself in the act of parting with his kingdom. He kept as we say a string to his kingdom, and while seeming to part with it, would make it more truly than ever his own, by attach-

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Franz Horn, Furness's *Variorum King Lear*, pp. 451-2.

ing his daughters more completely to him. He would give his kingdom to his daughters only in exchange for a more complete devotion to him, and would make them pledge their very souls to him in the act of inheriting his kingdom. Lear would make his little world more completely ego-centric than ever, and would give the most opulent part only to the one completely devoted to him. Their love, not his, was to be the measure of their inheritance, and their love for him he thought would be his best guarantee of continued and even greater deference.<sup>1</sup>

Lear was not, however, without some real affection and generosity, and some desire to please his daughters. His wish to gratify their ambition was sincere, but was not his strongest motive. He was not, however, conscious of any other motive, and credited himself solely with generosity, though as the action develops we can see that his scheme was after all but the best way of serving his own interests. Instead of being king of Britain he would become ruler over the three queens of Britain, and by this means his sceptre like mercy would be enthroned in the hearts of kings, and be more secure than any other form of power.

The days of King Lear were the days of absolute monarchs. This conception taken from an earlier age, Shakespeare transferred and applied to his own, which had not yet entirely settled the matter of sovereignty with their kings. In the days of Queen Elizabeth, and still more in those of James the First when the play was written, the rights of sovereigns was a very live question. Shakespeare, interested in the moral and spiritual life of individuals, had evidently

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Tolstoi's curious conception of *King Lear*, in his essay on Shakespeare.

studied this problem of tyranny very carefully. The effects of absolutism on the political and even spiritual life of the people were well known, but no one before had attempted to depict its dire influence upon the king himself. In *King Lear* the dramatist undertakes to portray the blighting effects of absolutism on the spirit of the monarch, and to show that the other evils grow from this. It is not the subjects of despots who suffer most, but the despots themselves. No person can enslave another without subjecting himself to a worse bondage. Slaves are less injured by slavery than are the masters.

Shakespeare had given much thought to the question of kings. In the plays based on English history he had depicted kings good and bad, and had shown something of his conception of the true king in *Henry the Fifth*, the last of the series. Then when he came to the period of his greatest tragedies, he again dealt with the problem of monarchy. In *Julius Cæsar* he had shown the danger of ambition for power, and in *Macbeth*, generally considered earlier than *King Lear*, had shown how utterly debasing an unscrupulous desire for kingship may become. Now in *King Lear* he takes up the legendary story of Lear and exhibits what Snider has well called "the disease of absolute authority."<sup>1</sup> Shakespeare pictures King Lear, under the fawning obedience and flattery of his subjects and his family, as developing an almost infinitely exaggerated conception of himself, and as finally going to pieces on this submerged rock of egoism.

It is not sufficient explanation of the improbable and exaggerated conditions depicted in *King Lear* to say that Shakespeare refers them to the barbarous times

<sup>1</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 155.

of Celtic Britain. Though the names and incidents are taken from that early period, the problems and the passions belong rather to the dramatist's own time. A mistaken tendency is shown by some critics in supposing that because Shakespeare had the universal habit of mind, he therefore did not have the particular; that because he belongs to all time he wrote for no special time. But there need be no doubt that the man who never, probably, published one of his dramas, wrote with his eye particularly on his own age and country. Though he draws his stories from all ages, Shakespeare, not having the historian's but the poet's temper, writes strictly for his contemporaries.<sup>1</sup>

A growing tendency among critics, unfortunately not yet become universal, is to study Shakespeare in the light of his own age. Even if the dramatist did lack the historic sense, there is no excuse for students of our age to ignore history, but all the more reason to view Shakespeare as an Elizabethan. It is because he ignored, as was inevitable, the inner and even many of the outer differences between his own and earlier ages, that we must be especially careful to remember that Shakespeare was an Elizabethan. *Lear* and other such plays cannot be explained, therefore, by referring them to the barbarism of earlier times. Shakespeare was giving us a picture of Elizabethan passions, intensified for purposes of study, and embedded in a Celtic environment. The outer forms only belonged to a legendary period, and these not with true historical accuracy; but the problem of the play was modern in Shakespeare's day, and for that matter is still modern. Absolutism has by no means disappeared even from communities avowedly democratic, and is

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Snider, *op. cit.*, p. 129.

the special vice of certain modern institutions. And no one was better able than Shakespeare to depict the evils attendant upon tyranny.<sup>1</sup>

True to the spirit of the despot, Lear has no intention of laying aside any real power in transferring his kingdom to his daughters. Coleridge has noticed "Lear's moral incapability of resigning the sovereign power in the very act of disposing of it."<sup>2</sup> Kreyssig says: "It is only the burthen and duties of empire that the tired old king wishes to be rid of. That his regal rights can suffer changes, never occurs to him."<sup>3</sup> Snider says: "Tired of the cares of government, yet not weary of its pomp and outward show, he proposes to resign the reality of power and yet retain its appearance—to play the king and yet be freed from the troubles of kingship."<sup>4</sup>

With these opinions about Lear there can be little dispute. The old king makes only a show of self-abnegation. In the very act of giving away he makes new and greater demands than ever. He gives away only the burdens and not the prerogatives of kingship, yet wishes his act to be thought magnanimous. He transfers the duties but not the rights of sovereignty, yet desires to be considered generous. His love for his daughters has none of the marks of sacrifice, but demands a more complete sacrifice and subjection on their part.<sup>5</sup> This it is important to notice if we are to understand the development of the play, for it is on this pseudo-sacrifice that the plot ultimately turns.

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Snider, *op. cit.* p. 152.

<sup>2</sup> *Op. cit.* pp. 335-6.

<sup>3</sup> English trans. in Furness, p. 461.

<sup>4</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 153.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Snider, *op. cit.* p. 157.

Thus is seen the effect of absolutism on the moral nature of Lear. In acquiring unlimited sovereignty over his dominion and over his family, he had completely lost sovereignty over himself. His whims and his caprice have utterly usurped the seat of government in his bosom, and he has become the servant and even the slave of unreasoning passion. He could no longer see himself as one among many, but thought of himself as the absolute ego, forgetting entirely the rights of other persons. His native vanity, so long flattered, had grown to an ungovernable passion, and had incapacitated him for considering anyone but himself. Hence even the apparent renunciation of the kingship was but a disguised attempt to gain still greater power. His daughters, who in growing into womanhood and in marrying had unconsciously passed partly from his control, would by this act once more be brought within his power. His apparent loosening of his hold on them would but bind them tighter to him.

## III

Lear's scheme of the trial by professions of love was considered by Coleridge to be but a trick contrived by Lear to afford Cordelia an opportunity to show herself more worthy than her sisters, and thus win the most opulent third of the kingdom. He calls attention to the fact that Lear had the division all prearranged when he first appears in the play, and that he had planned to give Cordelia the largest part. The trial of love, then, was to give Lear an excuse to favor Cordelia, with whom he intended to live, for he had no doubt she loved him most, and would quite

surpass her sisters in her declaration.<sup>1</sup> To this whim, then, Lear would add favoritism, making his division of the kingdom doubly culpable and dangerous. Ulrici thought Lear's motive in the whole affair was to convince himself by the daughters' public avowal of love that he could abdicate without danger to himself.<sup>2</sup> Professor Bradley, however, suggests that Lear's plan was not so inherently foolish as has been thought. He is the first, it seems, to observe that it was not part of Lear's intention to live alternately with his three daughters, but only with his favorite, Cordelia:

"I loved her most, and thought to set my rest  
On her kind nursery."

(I. i. 122-3.)

If this plan had been carried out, says Professor Bradley, "it would have had no such consequences as followed its alteration."<sup>3</sup> But it was its inherent bad qualities that prevented its success. No amount of wisdom on the part of Cordelia would have made Lear's foolish plan wise, but it might have discounted some of its folly, and rendered it less harmful. This is her condemnation, that she did not prevent her father's folly, when it was plainly her duty to accommodate herself to the whims of his old age.

The fatal error of Lear, apart from the inherent fatality of the original scheme, was to make the declarations of love an open trial. This gave a false advantage to the untrue but outspoken Goneril and Regan, and called upon the true love of Cordelia to take the form of adulation and flattery—a position always dis-

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Perrett, *Story of Lear from Monmouth to Shakespeare*. Reviewed in *Modern Language Review*, October, 1905. Cf. p. 71.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. English trans. in Furness, p. 9.

<sup>3</sup> *Shakespearean Tragedy*, p. 250.

liked by virtue. But it was all in keeping with the false character of Lear which had learned to live and thrive better on falsehood than on truth. Flattery, not true affection, was that which his soul craved. This is peculiarly the vice of rulers.

Lear accepts and seems satisfied with the empty protestations of the two older daughters and is pleased with their empty words. Which should appear to love him most depended on which should speak last. Each was ready to outdo the other in flattery. Both were ambitious and unscrupulous, and had learned the language of empty adulation in maintaining cordial relations with their father. Neither really loved him, but both were ready to exhaust the language of affection in order to gain an enlarged inheritance. No better evidence could be given of the false life of vanity and flattery that Lear had cultivated than this attitude of his daughters toward him. Children naturally have a true love for their parents, but when fathers eat sour grapes their children's teeth are set on edge.

To explain the conduct of the daughters is not, however, to excuse it. It is always the privilege of human beings to treat persons well who have treated them ill. Shakespeare never makes any persons the mere creatures of heredity, and even modern science now pays less deference to this doctrine than formerly. As a dramatist Shakespeare probably had no theories about such matters, though in other plays he shows his belief that children are not necessarily of the same character as their parents. With this conception, he holds Goneril and Regan strictly to account for their deeds, and before the inexorable law of poetic justice does not permit them to plead that they are but daughters of their father. Like nature herself, Shakespeare

does not inquire whence evil comes, but merely lets it take its course wherever found. The unrelenting hand of condemnation rests upon the two sisters from the moment they despise their father's weakness and scorn his senile infirmities.

Their hypocrisy, unobserved by Lear in his vanity, is immediately noticed by Cordelia. Unlike her sisters, the youngest daughter is nothing if not open and frank. Lear has entertained for her a warmer regard than for the others, and quite naturally expects this to be reciprocated. Faithlessness on the part of her sisters increased rather than lessened her obligation to her father. Duties to others have some sort of relation to their needs, and Lear was never so much in need of a faithful and tactful daughter as when Goneril and Regan vied with each other in flattery, attempting to wheedle the largest inheritance from their father.

Cordelia seems, however, to have more scorn for her sisters than love for her father. Her chief quality was haughtiness or pride, and this was allowed to crush out the virtue of compassion. Poor Lear! The only daughter who did love him was so rigid in her adherence to truth that she would not unbend to save him. She would rather lose her father's "liking" than have the "still-soliciting eye," and the flattering tongue of her sisters. (I. i. 230.) She utterly forgot him in her silent contempt for the perfidy of her sisters, and was more anxious to punish their hypocrisy than to reward his love. It is an admirable quality to hate wrong-doing; but it is more divine to have compassion on the foolish and unfortunate. Cordelia in her pride was unwilling to speak her true love for her father lest she should be thought also to be a flatterer. So she concluded to "love and be silent," and leave her father a

victim to the treachery of her sisters.

In taking this self-righteous attitude, Cordelia lost the opportunity to rescue her father from the cruel hands of her sisters,—an opportunity she later paid her life in the attempt to regain. She knew the treacherous characters of her sisters, if any one did, and undoubtedly should have exerted herself to the fullest to save her father from their power. Her subsequent course shows a recognition of the mistake she now made, but not until her obstinacy had gone so far that its effects could not be stayed. But she was the daughter of her father, and at bottom thought chiefly of herself. She had not been taught to make sacrifices for others, and in the critical moment for Lear her haughtiness played her false. Her disposition proved to have a fatal weakness, and in its outcome both she and her father were brought to destruction. That she later endeavors to undo her error shows, as Snider says, “an indestructible element of goodness in her nature.”<sup>1</sup> But she was unable to evade the consequences of the original impulse that caused the trouble.

Lear was quite unprepared for such a display of “pride and sullenness”<sup>2</sup> from his favorite daughter, and was forced at the last moment to change his plans and give her larger third to her sisters. It was no part of his plan to live with Goneril and Regan, as Professor Bradley has pointed out, but the sudden and unexpected perverseness of Cordelia compelled him, to his very great humiliation, to arrange to live with them by turns. Her hard and uncompromising love of truth placed her father in a false position, and threw him upon those who had no truth in them.

<sup>1</sup> *Op. cit.* p. 162.

<sup>2</sup> Coleridge, *op. cit.* p. 335.

It is the fashion in certain quarters to laud Cordelia as the embodiment of all that is excellent. Mrs. Jamieson speaks of her as "governed by the purest and holiest of impulses and motives," and as approaching "near to perfection." Others speak of her as the loveliest of all Shakespeare's women. But care must be taken not to praise too much those whom the course of the play condemns. Sweet and beautiful she is, but obstinate and perverse as well. If she appear as a goddess, it is as a goddess in the pouts, a little less than divine, and very human after all. We cannot but sympathize with her righteous indignation at the wickedness of her sisters, but neither can we forget that her neglect of her father subjected him to the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune, for as Lloyd says, "her disinheriting was a greater misfortune to her father than to herself."<sup>1</sup> A goddess should be not less, but more compassionate than mortals, and should be willing to do a great right, do a little wrong, and curb the cruel devil of her sisters' will.

Shakespeare apparently had very exalted notions of the duties of children to parents, and expected them to accommodate themselves to the weaknesses of their parents. We cannot rid ourselves of our filial relationships, and some things that cannot be mended must be endured. If Cordelia had been thoroughly well-disposed to her father, had had a pure unselish affection, there is no doubt she would have been willing in such an emergency to subjugate at least some of her pride to the necessities of the case. It cannot well be claimed that the display of hypocrisy on the part of her sisters deceived her as it did her father. Her plain duty, then, recognizing their deceit, was to state her affec-

<sup>1</sup> Furness, p. 16.

tion for her father in a manner that would at least save him from being completely their victim, even though such a declaration were distasteful to her. Her indignation was not against her father, but against her sisters, and her love for him, as was true also of Kent, was evidently not impaired by Lear's silly scheme of the trial. To state her love at this time would have been the acme of tact, and would have saved her from harder things in the future.

Cordelia's stubbornness irritated and angered her father who was not accustomed to such rebuffs. Expecting a hearty acquiescence he could not endure her sharp defiance. As he had accepted the hypocrisy of the elder two for a true love, so he misunderstood Cordelia's silence as a challenge to him rather than a rebuke to her sisters, as it was intended. Kent was willing to incur Lear's wrath to try to save him from his folly, but Cordelia was unwilling to speak her love. Lear was therefore forced to give her "more opulent third" to her sisters, and his whole ungovernable nature burst into a violent rage. His chagrin at his disappointment was unbearable, and he immediately stripped Cordelia of the intended inheritance and repudiated his fatherhood:

"Here I disclaim all my paternal care,  
Propinquity, and property of blood,  
And as a stranger to my heart and me  
Hold thee from this forever."

(I. i. 112-5.)

A hard curse that later causes him a "sovereign shame." Lear's motive is condemned as selfish by the anger he showed at Cordelia's refusal to flatter. To a sincere and truth-loving mind Cordelia would not have appeared loveless, but to one who desired only flattery

her answer was intolerable. Lear could brook no defiance, and least of all from the daughter he deemed the most obsequious.

Cordelia, nevertheless, is a lady of very great excellence. No doubt France speaks with a lover's fondness, but the play bears out all the good qualities he sees in her. (I. i. 249, ff.) The very fact that he as willingly takes her dowerless, as when he thought her a queen, speaks as well for his own worth as for hers. But Shakespeare has made her less excellent than in the old play of *King Lear*, where she was

"so nice and so demure:  
So sober, courteous, modest, and precise,"<sup>1</sup>

that she is the envy of her less virtuous sisters. In Shakespeare she is still the favorite of her father, but not quite the angel of the old play. The change in her character is no doubt made to emphasize the tragic aspects which Shakespeare saw in her from the first, and which he later makes explicit, though he leaves her sufficient virtue to win our love and pity.

The disinheritance and banishment of Cordelia are an extreme penalty, and unworthy of Lear. Because she could not give him more empty adulation than her sisters she has to suffer the loss of everything. The unworthy are rewarded because they are base enough for flattery, and the worthy is cast out because too honest for flattery and too noble for intrigue. Goneril and Regan had professed love in accordance with their ambitions rather than their affections, and were rewarded with all. But to an understanding heart there was more love in Cordelia's silence than in all the fine phrases of her designing sisters. Lear was the only one who did not know this, and he did not see it be-

<sup>1</sup> Furness, p. 393.

cause he had become morally blind through lifelong indulgence. Vanity had seized hold upon his heart, and his better nature had decayed. The sisters recognized his folly, and Goneril afterward remarked to Regan that "He always loved our sister most; and with what poor judgment he hath now cast her off appears too grossly." (I. i. 288-290.) As the late Professor Caird says: "It is wilfulness, exaggerated to the point of putting evil for good, and good for evil, that makes Lear banish his one dutiful daughter, and raise up the cold-blooded Goneril and the bitter selfishness of Regan to be his tormentors."<sup>1</sup>

None know better than the sisters that Lear has committed an act of grievous folly. To each other they speak of it, Regan attributing it to "the infirmity of his age," and Goneril saying that "The best and soundest of his time hath been but rash," and blaming his act on "the unruly waywardness that infirm and choleric years bring with them." (I. i. 291-297.) This recognition of the imbecility of his old age instead of making them more indulgent toward him but leads them doubly to despise his weakness. The further banishment of Kent is but additional evidence to them that their father is now subject to "unconstant starts," and puts them in fear that such outbreaks may occur at any time. With no feeling of tenderness toward him, they are only apprehensive that they will have trouble with him in the future.

The underplot differs from the Lear story in that the faithless son, Edmund, is first humiliated by his father's brazen acknowledgment of his illegitimacy before he began to conspire against the faithful son, Edgar. In the plot the primary conflict is between the

<sup>1</sup> *Contemporary Review*, Vol. LXX. p. 825.

father and the faithful daughter, until it is transferred to the faithless. In the underplot it is between the faithless and the faithful son, until the father is deceived into joining the faithless son. Both stories, as has been said, present the father's tragedy, and the fact that in one case the conflict is with daughters and in the other with sons precludes the view that the dramatist lays the blame for such conflicts on either sex. The desire to prevent such an interpretation may be one reason for Shakespeare's combination of the Gloucester story with the tragedy of Lear.

## IV

As was to be expected, Lear's retention of "The name and all th' addition to a King" (I. i. 135) immediately made trouble in the household of Goneril. The course of education he had given his daughters, and the example he had set them, were not conducive to soft compliance when once the power and authority were in their hands. "Till now," says Gervinus, "they had flattered him like dogs, they had said *ay* and *no* to everything he said."<sup>1</sup> They had obeyed complacently as long as they must. But when obedience was no longer compulsory, they at once assumed to command, and after the manner of their father. They had obeyed so long as he was in command, but now that they are in control they expect obedience from him. The law of service he had inaugurated was still kept in force after he retired, but was less acceptable to him when their relations to it were reversed. Lear soon found himself unable to tolerate the treatment he received, and rebelled against the domination of his daughters,

<sup>1</sup> *Shakespeare Commentaries*, Eng. trans. by Bunnètt, p. 624.

thus bringing the conflict to an acute stage. He could not see the defects in his own law of life until he and his daughters had exchanged places. He could not tolerate in them the same kind of sovereignty that he had himself exercised in the day of his power.

Lear and Goneril were incompatible from the outset. Trouble began about Lear's censorious manner and the disorderly conduct of his hundred retainers. Goneril's statement of the conduct of Lear's knights must be taken as true, as it is not the manner of Shakespeare to build dramatic actions on falsehoods. All such statements by persons of the drama must be taken as correct when there is nothing in the play to the contrary. There is every reason to believe that Lear's attendants feeling their importance did conduct themselves more like rowdies than gentlemen. Not one of the charges Goneril makes against them is refuted by Lear or by any one else. Lear furthermore makes himself objectionable by his fault-finding and complaining, until Goneril exclaims he "upbraids us On every trifle." (I. iii. 6-7.) The trouble is that Lear cannot understand he has given away his authority with his kingdom; and even the retention of the title of king does not secure him the subservience of his daughters and their households. He really intended to give nothing away, and is discomfited when he finds his authority gone:

"Idle old man,  
That still would manage those authorities  
That he hath given away!"

(I. iii. 17-19.)

Kent's devotion to Lear under all conditions seems to brighten up the general darkness, and to show that Lear was not altogether unlovable. Kent's recollection

of Lear before the evil days had come keeps him faithful in the folly of the king's old age. The Fool's unshaken allegiance when he knows full well that Lear has made an uncommon fool of himself points back to the days when Lear was wise. Lear's folly is not a lifelong failing, for men of the age of Kent<sup>1</sup> and Gloucester remember better days, though Goneril thinks that "The best and soundest of his time hath been but rash." (I. i. 293-4.) Old age has brought foolishness, and despotism has bred imbecility. Lear is not the man he was. Absolute power for so many years has debased his moral and spiritual nature. The price of tyranny, of despotic power over others, is to lose control of one's self. Lear still wishes to manage others when he has no power left to manage himself. He has so long been absolute that he cannot endure restraint, and cannot restrain himself. To be under the sway of Goneril is more than he can bear. Lear therefore gets into a bitter conflict with Goneril that leads from bad to worse until both are undone.

Lear's residence with Goneril is in every way disastrous. As Goneril says, he sets them all to odds (I. iii. 6). The dependents at once realize the change in authority, and before he has completed the arrangements connected with the division of the kingdom their obedience is less instant ("Who stirs?" I. i. 125). There is an immediate abatement of kindness and deference from all alike, the dependants as well as the daughters. Confusion reigns in the royal household, and Goneril informs her servants that they need pay little attention to Lear, and that "what grows of it, no matter." (I. iii. 24.) When Lear first notices the neglect, he hopes it is not meant for unkindness (I. iv. 66-7). But his

<sup>1</sup> Kent was 48 years old. Cf. I. iv. 38, and II. ii. 58.

worst fears are realized when Goneril herself breaks out at him and complains of his "insolent retinue," and requests him "A little to disquantity your train" (I. iv. 242), and to see that the remainder conduct themselves more orderly.

The effect of this upon Lear reveals his character better than almost any other incident of the play. For the first time he recognizes the wrong done Cordelia:

"O most small fault,  
How ugly didst thou in Cordelia show!"  
(I. iv. 260-1.)

Intolerance and tyranny had become a habit with Lear, but when he could be made to see his wrong, he gladly acknowledged it. This characteristic will in the end prove a saving grace. But his moral vision has been dimmed, and he cannot think for a moment that he is in the wrong in his difficulty with Goneril. He roundly curses Goneril, disavowing his fatherhood, and begging heaven that her children may also be thankless. Not for a moment does he see that his own conduct has been at fault, but with burning fury and fiery indignation he refuses to stay longer with her, not dreaming he will be equally unwelcome with Regan. The arbitrary features that marked his rule when he was in authority are intolerable to Lear now they are exercised by his daughters. It is such reversed relationships as this that reveal to men the character of their own acts.

Lear's mind had undoubtedly become weakened by the long course of his arbitrary and uncharitable use of power. In the bitter despair of his disappointment at Goneril he fears his mind may give way. He has not been accustomed to the necessity of self-control, and he now finds it quite impossible. He long ago lost his moral balance and now is in danger of losing his

mental balance. His prayer to heaven to keep him from madness is very pathetic, but could come only from one who had long indulged a wild-horse temper, and who was beginning to be conscious of his weakness.

In no way blaming himself, but charging all his troubles against Goneril's hatefulness, Lear sweeps out of her house in a perfect storm of rage, and betakes himself to Regan, saying:

"I have another daughter,  
Who, I am sure, is kind and comfortable."  
(I. iv. 299-300.)

Regan's absence from home at the Duke of Gloucester's causes him little discomfiture. But when she and her husband refuse to respond to his call to come out to him his rage bursts into a perfect fury. His pride and haughtiness are wounded, and the later interview confirms the belief that Regan is as ungrateful as her sister.

Now, at last, the old king has estranged all his daughters, and begins to see the real situation. He is soon entirely disillusioned when both join in the attempt to curtail his dignity, and to deprive him of his royal state, and show that they would even gladly be rid of him altogether. With awful suddenness he is brought to realize he is houseless and homeless, and, but for the faithful Kent and the Fool, entirely friendless. Having cursed and banished the one daughter that truly loved him, what inducement can he offer for the unloving to be faithful? They have now the authority, and they exercise it in the same arbitrary and heartless manner that he had done. They have but bettered the instruction he gave them, and what more can he expect?

Cursing his daughters, and calling them "unnatural hags," Lear bursts out into the night, which the drama-

tist to mark the sympathy of nature and man makes wild and tempestuous. But the storm in nature is nothing compared with the tempest in Lear's breast. The worst storms are caused by spiritual upheavals, not by natural disturbances. With a desperate effort at self-control Lear says, "No, I'll not weep. I have full cause of weeping." (II. iv. 280-281.) His restraint of tears, however, is at the expense of an overthrown mind, which Lear himself foresees, "O fool, I shall go mad." Now is seen the spectacle so well described by Schlegel: "The threefold dignity of a king, an old man, and a father, is dishonored by the cruel ingratitude of his unnatural daughters: the old Lear, who out of a foolish tenderness has given away everything, is driven out to the world a wandering beggar."<sup>1</sup>

Lear is now in a condition the very opposite of what he expected from the division of his kingdom. Instead of added power, he is stripped of all power; instead of increased reverence and devotion, he has only scorn and contempt; instead of the enlarged love and attachment of all three daughters, he has the hatred of two, and separation from the third; in place of a more comfortable home for his old age, and the devoted attendance of his favorite, Cordelia, he has no home at all, and is forced out into the storm and tempest of the night, and glad to take refuge in the hovel of a bedlamite, and rest on his pallet of straw.

The bitter disappointment of Lear confirms the belief that the division of the kingdom was not meant to be a sacrifice, but a purchase of the complete devotion of his daughters at the expense of a partial relinquishment of his kingdom. While seeming to give everything to his daughters, and to leave himself dependent

<sup>1</sup> *Op. cit.* p. 411.

on their bounty, he really intended to give them nothing substantial, but to collect from them a devotion that would be the best assurance of a dignified and royal old age. He was acting, indeed, more from selfishness and vanity than from generosity and kindness.

## v

The first glimpse of Lear in the storm and tempest of the night reveals the fact that his mind has turned. Some have regarded him as insane from the start, among whom are many of the medical writers.<sup>1</sup> Others, with much better reason say he became insane early in the play.<sup>2</sup> These differ about the exact point at which Lear's mind gives way, varying between his abdication, the cursing of Cordelia, the mock-trial of his daughters, and certain other scenes. There is about as much difference of opinion among experts as in a modern crime of a wealthy young fool. In both cases alike an impartial jury finds it necessary to dismiss all specialists, and to fall back upon common sense. In order, then, to reach a proper conclusion, we must consider not only the evidence of the text of the play, but its relation to the larger theme of the play, and to the Shakespearean drama in general.

With the theme of the play in mind, it cannot well be maintained that Lear was insane from the first. If he were, the play would be but a mad-house tragedy, and of no value to supposedly sane persons. Shakespeare's tragedies all turn on moral not mental maladies, and

<sup>1</sup> Furness says that Mrs. Lennox was the earliest to say Lear was made from the outset, in her *Shakespeare Illustrated*, 1753-4. (Furness, 412.) Of the same opinion are Brigham (Furness, 412-3) and Bucknill (Furness, 415-6).

<sup>2</sup> E. g., Ray, *cf.* Furness, 413-14.

are tragedies of the moral life. The so-called early marks of madness are evidences of perverseness and folly rather than of insanity, unless this term is to be made wide enough to cover all foolish and criminal aberrations. The dramatist who would consider Lear mad from the start, and yet make a tragedy out of his career would himself be the really mad person. Lear's early conduct is certainly very erratic, but it is folly not madness, though that kind of criminal folly which leads to madness. It is this that is the theme of the drama—how a man because of indulging his vanity and selfishness lands at last in madness.

Any other interpretation would tear the heart out of the drama. The play depicts the growth, fulness, and relief of Lear's madness, with the various influences affecting these. Lear goes mad only because he first goes wrong; and loses control of himself because he was too busy trying to manage others, and to subject them to the arbitrariness of his own perverse will. Shakespeare may or may not have known accurately all the marks of insanity, but he did know that a pampered and perverse egoism is one of the most prolific causes of madness. Absolutism always induces a kind of insanity, in monarchs as well as in men. Nobody knew better than Shakespeare the thinness of the veil that separates a deranged will and an unbalanced mind. Shakespeare would say to us that it is Lear's moral shortcomings that are responsible for his mental wanderings. There may be plenty of cases where the mind is overthrown by physical conditions, but Lear's was unbalanced by a long course of moral perversity and egoism. His disease is spiritual rather than physical. Shakespeare at any rate treats it as such, and this must be his justification for holding Lear strictly to

account.

No doubt the ingratitude of the two faithless daughters was the last straw to break the already overstrained mind of Lear. Somewhere, then, between Lear's departure from Gloucester's castle and his appearance in the storm, the old king's wits actually fail altogether. Shakespeare's practice of reflecting the disturbed condition of the moral world in the storm and tempest of nature will help us to see that the breaking of the storm as he leaves Gloucester's castle marks the dramatic collapse of Lear's mind. Lear takes the raging of the elements as a mark of nature's hostility, and tries to excite their pity by calling himself "a poor, infirm, weak, and despised old man." Then he reproaches the elements for joining with his "two pernicious daughters" and engaging in

"Your high engender'd battles 'gainst a head  
So old and white as this. Oh! Oh! 'tis foul!"  
(III. ii. 23-4.)

When Gloucester next sees him he pities Lear's dire distress, not knowing he will soon lose his own eyes as Lear his wits. It was Lear's mind and Gloucester's eyes that led them astray, and in losing wits and eyes "the wheel is come full circle."

Lear's mind is quite distracted by the time he meets Edgar as "Poor Tom," but with the culmination there are also signs of a spiritual purging that is to bring his restoration. The turning-point is reached in the arraignment and trial of his daughters, in which he demands justice upon them, not knowing that in the course of justice neither he nor they should see salvation. In the uncontrolled fury of his passion he soon completely exhausts himself, and collapses into a soothing and healing sleep from which he wakes to a re-

newed life. His passion has run its course, and has worn itself out. With his sleep the tide of passion has turned, and events have happened that open the way for his restoration.

In the great tragedies of Shakespeare wrong-doing reacts upon the social order as well as upon the individual, and creates widespread confusion and disaster. The crime of Claudius puts all Denmark in trouble, and even endangers its peace with Norway. The crime of Macbeth makes civil war in Scotland and invites invasion from England. **The wrong of Lear creates trouble** in his family, and disorder in the kingdom, and even brings about an attack from France. Shakespeare saw clearly the social disintegration of evil, and he pictured it so that he who runs may read.

## VI

Cordelia at no time drops out of the play entirely. Her letter to Kent (II. ii. 161-2) shows that she has not lost interest in her father, and in Kent's "obscured course." Being cut off from Lear by her banishment, she keeps in touch with him by a correspondence with Kent, and maintains spies in the country to inform her of the affairs of state. She had evidently, too, thought better of her haughtiness, and is now willing to accommodate herself to the conditions she cannot mend. Her life in France, in happy marriage with the King, has given her time for reflection, and she now seems to be awaiting an opportunity to undo the harm caused by her pride. The occasion comes with the division "'twixt Albany and Cornwall," and now she is ready to send a French force to succor the old king.

Cordelia's difference with her father had quickly given way to her love, and she began cautiously and slowly to try to ingratiate herself once more into his favor. When she found the occasion for intervention she quickly dispatched a force to his aid. At the same time Lear is going through a process of moral purging, and his mind and heart are getting ready for the reconciliation. Kent understands the moral process going on in Lear's soul, and discerns a consciousness of the wrong done to Cordelia that makes Lear ashamed to see her:

“A sovereign shame so elbows him; his own unkindness  
That stripp'd her from his benediction, turn'd her  
To foreign casualties, gave her dear rights  
To his dog-hearted daughters; these things sting  
His mind so venomously that burning shame  
Detains him from Cordelia.”

(IV. iii. 42-7.)

But Cordelia, too, has now a different and a humbler spirit, and is willing even to give all her “outward worth” to him that will help restore her father's “bereaved sense.” It has been a fearful trial, but the fires have subdued and refined the spirits of both father and daughter.

The tenderness with which Cordelia nurses her father back to sanity almost obliterates our memory of her first intolerance. The spirits of both have undergone a great transformation. Both have experienced a spiritual earthquake that has shaken their being to the very foundations. Perhaps nowhere else has the dramatist penetrated so deeply into the very springs of life, and nowhere else has he better depicted two souls in the remaking. Their attitudes to each other have entirely changed. Lear now humbles himself before Cordelia, thinking her still hostile, and is willing to sub-

mit to taking poison from her. Cordelia on her part begs his fatherly blessing, assuring him of her goodwill, and pressing upon him her kind offices. These he accepts when convinced of her kindness and requests her to "forget and forgive; I am old and foolish." (IV. vii. 84-85.) But it is the dramatist's opinion that such wrongs cannot be settled merely by the reconciliation of the parties. The social order must be propitiated, and that is inexorable in its claims. The wrong must be adjusted, and if need be the parties must sacrifice themselves to this end.

Most of the earlier forms of the Lear story present the old king as going over to Cordelia in France when turned out by his elder daughters. This is the case in Geoffrey of Monmouth, Holinshed, *The Mirror for Magistrates*, in the old play, in Spenser, and in the ballad, which may, however, be later than Shakespeare. The *King Lear* of Shakespeare is the only version of any importance in which Lear does not go over to France. Shakespeare must have had some good reason for so noticeable a departure from the earlier forms of the story. The change could not have been in the interest of unity of place, as this was a dramatic principle he frequently ignored. The more probable explanation is that he considered that for Lear to go to France would be a temporary escape from the consequences of his act, and this he could not allow. Shakespeare is as inexorable as nature in making a man stay by his act, and see it through to its bitterest extreme. Only in this way does its working effect that purging of the soul in which the dramatist showed so great an interest.

The favorite explanation of Shakespeare's refusal to allow Cordelia's French forces to be successful

against England is that his patriotism would not permit otherwise, and neither would that of the patrons of the theatre. No doubt this is true, but it is only a small part of the truth. While not indifferent to popular and patriotic feeling, Shakespeare was generally governed by larger conceptions. The true explanation is probably to be found in the moral nature of the conflict in which from the start Cordelia had forfeited any right to outward success. It was still possible for her, however, to wrest from the defeat a moral victory, and this the dramatist depicts her as winning.

Nothing is more indicative of the change in father and daughter than the resignation with which they accept defeat, and their composure when they find themselves captives. They both have now mastered themselves, and prison bars cannot make them slaves. The once haughty monarch readily accepts imprisonment so long as he has his beloved Cordelia with him. The absolute king assumes bondage with an equanimity that is the very antithesis of his original frame of mind. The man of authority is now deprived of all power, and under the surveillance of a petty official. The unlimited king submits to be deprived of all liberty, and confined within the walls of a prison cell, with a composure as unlike as possible the arrogance and egoism of his kingly mind. All he now wants is that Cordelia, whose mind is now as humble as his own, shall be his prison-mate and attendant:

"Come, let's away to prison;  
We two alone will sing like birds i' the cage.  
. . . . . So we'll live,  
And pray, and sing, and tell old tales and laugh  
At gilded butterflies, and hear poor rogues  
Talk of court news."

(V. iii. 8-14.)

Lear has learned his lesson, and Cordelia has learned hers. He has found out that love is the greatest thing in the world, and he now cares not how little else he has, provided he has love. All his assumed absolutism and autocracy have given place to meekness and docility. He is willing now to exchange love (equality) with Cordelia, recognizing it as better than power (superiority). Probably no character in Shakespeare exhibits such a "process of purification" before he learns the lesson of life that love is best. Professor Bradley very appropriately suggests that the play might well be called "The Redemption of King Lear."<sup>1</sup> But Lear's recovery is not to his former self, for his body and mind are greatly enfeebled. The process of his sorrow and its purging has brought a moral and spiritual recovery, but it has worn out his body and his mind. Lear is a new man spiritually, but physically he is now an old man and ready for the grave.

Though acknowledging his wrong to Cordelia, Lear at no time came to admit any responsibility for the conflict with Goneril and Regan, and did not see the wrong of his original scheme of division. It is very true that it was Cordelia rather than her sisters whose conduct brought into operation the hidden forces of evil that lay in the scheme. No responsibility placed on Cordelia, however, can excuse the ungrateful behavior of the other two. Their schemes and counter-schemes, and the illicit love of both for Edmund, are but developments of the same character that did violence to Lear. Shakespeare was of course unfamiliar with the many modern devices for shifting moral responsibility to the broad shoulders of heredity and environment, but he was intimately acquainted with similar attempted eva-

<sup>1</sup> *Shakespearean Tragedy*, p. 285.

sions under other names. To all of these he gives the answer of the universal moral sense that no such vicarious responsibility is possible. Though he traces carefully the moral descent of Goneril and Regan and of Edmund, joined as they are in vice, he brings them all strictly to account, though he makes the two sisters suffer at their own hands. He does not let them fall into the hands of Cordelia, apparently thinking she had forfeited any right to be the nemesis of the play. Edgar, however, plays this part to Edmund.

## vii

Shakespeare has been censured for changing the original story, and letting Lear and Cordelia be brought to death. Dr. Johnson long ago gave voice to the protest, and little in addition has been said. "Shakespeare," he says, "has suffered the virtue of Cordelia to perish in a just cause, contrary to the natural ideas of justice, to the hope of the reader, and, what is yet more strange, to the faith of the chronicles. A play in which the wicked prosper, and the virtuous miscarry, may doubtless be good, because it is a just representation of the common events of human life; but, since all reasonable beings naturally love justice, I cannot easily be persuaded that the observation of justice makes a play worse; or that, if other excellences are equal, the audience will not always rise better pleased from the final triumph of persecuted virtue."<sup>1</sup> That is, Dr. Johnson excuses what he considers the lack of idealism only on the plea of realism. It is allowable, he says, for a dramatist to violate justice because in actual life such violation often takes place:

<sup>1</sup> "Introduction to Shakespeare."

but even then he thinks it would be better for the dramatist to adhere strictly to justice.

When Shakespeare took up the old story of King Lear he saw the characters of Lear and Cordelia in a very different light from all previous writers. The older writers make the issue of the conflict with the sisters a complete triumph for Lear and Cordelia. The old ballad alone makes the story tragic, Cordelia being slain in the battle and Lear dying upon her breast. It is thought, however, that the ballad is later, not earlier, than Shakespeare, leaving the dramatist as the first to turn the old comedy into tragedy. As he later did the reverse of this in *The Winter's Tale*, it must be conceded that he had some deliberate intention in such matters. The opinion is growing among students that Shakespeare showed a deeper insight into conduct and character than the old chroniclers and dramatists, and that whatever changes he made were in the interests of a higher justice. But Shakespeare's conception of poetic justice differed very greatly from that of lesser dramatists of his own and especially of succeeding periods.

Criticism, however, is learning very slowly to have confidence in Shakespeare's moral judgment. With a few notable and eminent exceptions like Lamb, the dramatist's fellow countrymen have not endorsed his version of the story. Among recent critics Professor Herford is the most pronounced in saying that " 'Poetic justice' is sublimely defied in the doom of Lear and Cordelia."<sup>1</sup> It remains for Professor Raleigh, however, to suggest that Shakespeare's imagination ran away with him. He says Shakespeare "had wound the tragedy up to such a pitch that a happy ending, as

<sup>1</sup> Eversley *Shakespeare*, Vol. IX. p. 14.

it is called, was unthinkable.”<sup>1</sup> Many of the older English and German critics, however, have defended the dramatist. They have recognized in Shakespeare a great constructive thinker, whose imagination, though great, was never master of his thought. They have seen that it is in power of philosophic thought that he excelled, and not in imagination, if the fact that he invented few stories can be taken as of any significance. His work consisted rather in broadening and deepening popular stories and chronicles, and making them the expression of “the very life of things.”<sup>2</sup>

Shakespeare was himself fully aware of the significance of the change he introduced into the story, and has anticipated the criticism that has arisen. When Lear enters with the dead Cordelia in his arms, howling in the anguish of his grief, Kent exclaims, “Is this the promised end?” (V. iii. 264.) But in the course of events Kent becomes reconciled to the death of both Cordelia and Lear. When others would prolong the life of the suffering king, he says:

“Vex not his ghost. Oh, let him pass! he hates him  
That would upon the rack of this tough world  
Stretch him out longer.”

(V. iii. 314-6.)

<sup>1</sup> *Shakespeare*, p. 92.

<sup>2</sup> Professor Bradley is quite hopeless, however, and says that “there never was vainer labour than that of critics who try to make out that the persons in these dramas meet with ‘justice’ or their ‘deserts’” (p. 279). He thinks that the way a play turns out depends on the period of Shakespeare’s life in which it was written. “I believe,” he says, “Shakespeare would have ended his play thus [letting Lear and Cordelia live] had he taken the subject in hand a few years later, in the days of *Cymbeline* and *The Winter’s Tale*” (p. 252). A deeper study, however, will reveal great differences between these plays and *King Lear*.

All explanations of Shakespeare that overlook moral considerations are utterly futile. The conviction is growing in many quarters that Shakespeare's dealings with the characters are governed by the principles of the moral life. It is Shakespeare's greatness that in his drama as in the world "Moral causes govern the standing and the falling of men and nations. They save or destroy them by a silent, inexorable fatality."<sup>1</sup>

The death of Cordelia is not, however, a simple, but a very complex, matter. She is first manifestly a victim of her own obstinacy. She saw clearly that her sisters were deceiving her father, and if she knew nothing worse about them than this, should have taken steps to save her father from them. Lear was predisposed to her, and nothing but her haughtiness prevented him from giving her "a third more opulent," and from finding the home of his old age with her. In the end, when she tried to undo the wrong she had done, she found her sisters so fully in control of affairs that she was compelled to sacrifice herself to her father's cause. We admire the whole-hearted devotion by which she attempted to atone for her fault, and almost forgive her for her pride. But no love however devoted can call back the stream of effects from her original act, or muzzle the tiger in her sisters. By her sacrifice she has purged her fault and has been purified in the process of time. But it must be said that her death was inevitable, though we cannot but think that *in the end*, though in the end only, she is a saint and a martyr. The development of this character in her is one of the main themes of the play.

There is but little trouble in accepting the drama-

<sup>1</sup> Matthew Arnold, quoted by Vida D. Scudder, *Atlantic Monthly*, June, 1910, p. 838.

tist's verdict on Lear. He had long outlived his self-control, and it was only a matter of time and occasion until he should commit some act of folly that would be his ruin and the probable ruin of his kingdom. That the kingdom was not destroyed is due rather to Providence than to any saving grace in Lear or his daughters. Lear's vanity had in it elements of tragedy. Yet, though Shakespeare could not save Lear's life, such is his moral faith that this meanest and most selfish of vices is subjugated even in a king, and gives place to the virtue and grace of humility. A more difficult spiritual task can scarcely be conceived. Yet Shakespeare depicts the whole matter with consummate artistic skill, and presents it with an unwavering faith in the possibility of its eradication.

Gloucester, meanwhile, is saved from himself by the skillful deception of Edgar in the famous Cliff Scene. By very careful manipulation of the blind old man Edgar brings him to his senses, and, as soon as he can, reveals himself to him. His devotion to his father has been truer than Cordelia's to Lear, for at no time does he get into an attitude of opposition or defiance, but patiently resigns himself to the injustice done him at the instigation of Edmund. For this heroic faithfulness Shakespeare spares him to the end and brings him to a triumphant vindication. Nothing extraordinary happens to bring it about, but only the plain course of events. Shakespeare again shows a sublime faith in the moral order, and in its certainty to bring ultimate triumph to right. Albany, too, who shows an excellent spirit, is brought through the play and made the heir of the entire kingdom.

Tate's revision of *King Lear*, like all eighteenth century versions of Shakespeare, is now-a-days pretty

generally discredited. But a careful reading nevertheless reveals many features that even the twentieth century mind is at first disposed to regard as excellencies. In making Edgar rather than France the wooer and later the husband of Cordelia, Tate weaves the two stories of the play closer together than Shakespeare. The Gloucester story ceases to be a parallel and underplot to the Lear story, and becomes an integral part of the main movement. But his conclusion, in which he married Edgar to Cordelia, takes away Shakespeare's verdict on Cordelia's obstinacy, thus robbing the play of much of its moral meaning. Furthermore, his continuance of Lear in a renewed life detracts from Shakespeare's pronouncement on the curse of absolutism on both the sovereign and the people, and destroys the Shakespearean conception that it is a fatal vice of kings. Opinions may differ about the artistic merits of Tate's version, but there cannot well be a denial that Shakespeare's has much the deeper spiritual meaning. It is here that Shakespeare always excels. Shakespeare's play is a kind of Final Judgment, in which as Albany says:

"All friends shall taste  
The wages of their virtue, and all foes  
The cup of their deservings."  
(V. iii. 303-5.)

Probably more than in any other play the development of the narrative separates the good and the bad, making the good better, and the bad worse, and finally leading those "more sinned against than sinning" into better ways.

### VIII

The opinion has recently been expressed that the view of the world presented in *King Lear* is not the Christian

conception.<sup>1</sup> It is very difficult to sympathize with this opinion, for it involves an erroneous view of *King Lear*, or of Christianity, or of both. Nothing could be more in accord with Christianity than the view of the moral life just set forth as the underlying conception of the play. That it is moral wrong that separates persons into two classes, and that the broad way leads to destruction, and the narrow way to life is the very essence of Christianity. Both the play and Christianity maintain the view that the course of human life is presided over by a Power greater than the individual, and that that Power metes out destinies according to the life lived. At the same time both provide for a change of heart on the part of evil-doers. Repentance and forgiveness are fundamental conceptions in both. It does not come within the sphere of the dramatist to formulate metaphysical conceptions, but his view of the moral order is in perfect accord with the theistic view of Christianity. Many of the conceptions of Christianity are no doubt not to be found in the play, but whatever views the play does contain are decidedly Christian, and it contains about all the elements of Christianity that could naturally be included in a drama. Professor Bradley has well said that in *King Lear* "evil is *merely* destructive: it finds nothing, and seems capable of existing only on foundations laid by its opposite. It is also *self*-destructive: it sets these beings at enmity. . . . Thus the world in which evil appears seems to be at heart unfriendly to it."<sup>2</sup> This is the fundamental Christian conception that evil is the one great destroyer of men, and the unalterable

<sup>1</sup> A. E. Taylor, "The Case of Lear," *University Magazine* (Montreal), VI, 2, April, 1907, pp. 206-225.

<sup>2</sup> *Shakespearean Tragedy*, p. 304.

enemy of mankind.

Swinburne has said that the play is "dark and hard," and presents a "tragic fatalism" that has no "twilight of atonement," and no reconciliation.<sup>1</sup> Professor Bradley has also said that "In no other of his tragedies does humanity appear more pitifully infirm or more hopelessly bad."<sup>2</sup> Rather should we say that it presents the moral world as inexorably just, and that it is hopeless only to persons who persist in the ways of evil. If life were the only desirable thing, there would be only despair for evil-doers, for Lear and Cordelia do not save their lives by changing their ways. But the play depicts an open way toward moral restoration and seems to promise redemption to all who will forsake evil. So long, then, as the world is just, but holds out hope for the penitent, there is no need for despair. The play of course is dark, for there is so much evil, and so much suffering, and so few of the persons escape the final judgment. But there is always a ray of light in the darkness, and where there is light there is hope. The few persons, too, who escape the contamination are among the finest characters in all Shakespeare. We are ceasing, however, to expect Shakespeare's full and final view of the world in any one play, and are beginning to look to the entire Shakespearean drama for his complete thought. When we do that we get a view of the world that inspires confidence rather than despair.

Professor Bradley has noticed that the references to religion in *King Lear* are about as frequent as in the final plays. It is very significant that the references to religion become more frequent as Shakespeare ap-

<sup>1</sup> *Study of Shakespeare*, pp. 171-2.

<sup>2</sup> *Op. cit.* p. 273.

proached the end. The last plays, too, present a brighter and much more optimistic view of life than the earlier, and this has been taken to mean that the dramatist presents this as his mature and final view. It may only mean, however, that Shakespeare had now reached the stage of his dramatic career in which he could fill out and complete his view, and that for this completion the ideas of mercy and forgiveness were naturally presented more clearly in the last plays. In support of this it may be urged that nothing in the last plays is really new, for every element had already appeared in numerous earlier plays. But what is new is that these elements of light and hope are given a fresh emphasis, indicating no doubt a growing confidence in these principles on the part of the dramatist.

It is because of these great moral and spiritual qualities in his dramas that Shakespeare is so rapidly becoming the greatest teacher of the modern world, and especially of the English-speaking peoples, as Homer was of the Greeks. The long-continued and careful study of his dramas has trained the modern mind to think his thoughts until his influence has been surpassed only by the Bible itself. We are slowly coming to agree with his opinion of the characters of his dramas, and in this are acquiring a much more reliable moral judgment. The centuries of criticism have veered hither and thither in their judgments, but now show a tendency to come back to Shakespeare, and to accept whatever is manifestly the opinion of the dramatist. Shakespeare is rightly assuming his place as one of the greatest school-masters of mankind.

## NOTES



## NOTES

### NOTE A

#### THE STAGING OF THE FIRST SCENE OF HAMLET

THE all but universal failure of actors as well as critics to find any great significance in the first scene of *Hamlet* has led inevitably to an indifference to or a neglect of its proper staging. If Shakespeare's text is taken as of no significance, then it follows that the staging of the scene will not be such as to give any meaning to his words. If the scene cannot be understood as of great dramatic importance, it is not to be wondered at that it has not had a proper and significant setting.

There are no stage directions in the First Folio except the entrances and exits, but modern editors generally adopt those suggested by Capell and Malone, as follows: "Elsinore. A Platform before the Castle." This is no doubt correct, so far as it goes, but it needs elaboration. Most actors seem to make this a view looking toward the castle, with the platform in the foreground, and only the castle in the background. But the point of view should be reversed, with the platform and part of the castle in the immediate foreground, and with the outlook from the platform as the wide and extensive background of the scene.

On Shakespeare's own stage there was, of course, no attempt to represent the actual setting of the scene. It was this very lack of stage setting, as an appeal

to the eye, that made it necessary for Shakespeare to give full and exhaustive exposition to such opening scenes as were of great dramatic importance. In *Hamlet* this dramatic exposition is unusually full and complete, and should determine the modern staging of the scene. On our representative stage, all the elements in the exposition should be given their due and proper place.

The proper setting is not difficult to determine, for it is all brought out in the conversation of the guards. Apart from the entrances and the exits of the various persons and the ghost, the settings are all referred to in one of the speeches of Marcellus. In his inquiry for an explanation of the extraordinary activities he sees going on in the country he speaks first of "this same strict and most observant watch." He asks why "nightly toils the subject of the land," and then goes on to explain the nature of the work upon which these laborers are engaged. He next speaks of "such daily cast of brazen cannon," and asks:

"Why such impress of shipwrights, whose sore task  
Does not divide the Sunday from the week?"

The two things, then, that especially attract his attention are the feverish haste with which the Danes are casting new cannon, and the re-doubled speed with which they are building new ships. In both of these kinds of labor they are working day and night.

It is to be supposed, therefore, that some evidence of these operations can be observed from the platform where they are standing, even in the darkness of the night. The foundries and the shipyards where these labors are going on are doubtless on the water-front, about the harbor, which is overlooked by the castle

and the platform. They might, indeed, be both seen and heard even in the night.

The stage setting, then, should indicate these nightly toils. Instead of showing the castle alone in the background, the setting should show a platform overlooking the harbor and the sea, and with some indication even in the night of the foundries and the shipyards that are busy both day and night. This setting, then, would suggest as the play intimates that the Danes are anxiously preparing to meet an impending attack from the sea upon their kingdom. As we know from Horatio's words, this attack was to come from Norway, led by young Fortinbras for the purpose of regaining the lands lost to Denmark by his father. The setting, then, on our modern representative stage should give some clue to this situation.

## NOTE B

### HORATIO, AND HIS PART IN THE PLAY

MANY critics have noticed little apparent discrepancies in the rôle played by Horatio in the first scene of the play. Professor Bradley calls attention to the fact that when Hamlet meets Horatio he scarcely recognizes him at first.<sup>1</sup> Horatio seems, in fact, to be a stranger in Denmark, though he tells Hamlet that he had seen his father once. (I. ii. 186.) At a later time Hamlet explains to him some of the manners and customs of the country, and his remark that he is himself "a native here and to the manner born," seems to imply that Horatio is not a native. (I. iv. 15.)

<sup>1</sup> *Shakespearean Tragedy*, p. 404.

Yet, in spite of this, it is to Horatio that the dramatist gives the task of explaining "the past history and present affairs of the kingdom." It is he who answers the questions of Marcellus in the first scene about the war-like preparations. It is he who gives the reason for the feverish casting of cannon and the building of new ships with such haste that the laborers are kept busy day and night, as well as Sundays.

Horatio seems to know more about the affairs of Denmark than Marcellus, who presumably is himself a Dane. And all this before he has met Hamlet, in the play. Horatio is able to explain the present situation in the light of the past history of the country, and it is from him that we get nearly all the historical facts relating to the elder Hamlet. From the Prince we get the character of the late king, but it is from Horatio that we get his history.

Though this seems to be a discrepancy in the play, it is easily seen to be of no vital significance in the interpretation of the drama. It may possibly be considered an artistic blemish, but it does not affect the larger meaning of the play. It is of no great consequence who supplies this preliminary information about the elder Hamlet, and furnishes the history of the country. The important thing is that this information is given, and that it is given by one so close to Hamlet in the play that his words can be taken as giving us accurate facts of history.

Had the dramatist cared for such matters, he might have avoided the discrepancy by having Horatio, as the stranger, ask the questions, and by giving the answers to Marcellus who apparently is a native Dane. But this would have furnished the information from a

source not close enough to Hamlet to give proper color to his words. Throughout the play the part of confidant is everywhere played by Horatio. For the dramatist to give this part to Horatio at the opening of the play before he had met his old friend from the university is to show that his mind was busy chiefly upon the larger aspects of the drama. These are in no way affected by the fact that in the play we get our inside information from an outside person.

### NOTE C

#### HAMLET, III. IV. 122-130

*Queen.*

O gentle son, . . .

Upon the heat and flame of thy distemper

Sprinkle cool patience. Whereon do you look?

*Hamlet.*

On him, on him! Look you, how pale he glares!

His form and cause conjoin'd, preaching to stones,

Would make them capable.—Do not look upon me,

Lest with this piteous action you convert

My stern effects; then what I have to do

Will want true color! tears perchance for blood.

THIS conversation follows immediately the ghost's last appearance and his final words to Hamlet. The Prince thought his father's ghost had come his "tardy son to chide," and the ghost tells him,

"This visitation  
Is but to whet thy almost blunted purpose."

He then directs Hamlet's attention to his mother, counselling him to "step between her and her fighting soul."

Hamlet, then, is once more forced to face the very difficult task of trying to revenge his father and at the same time to spare his mother. This is the moral

character of Hamlet disclosing itself. The double duty is hard to discharge. To revenge his father is to kill the king, and it is extremely difficult to kill the king without harming his mother. Hamlet is placed in a very perplexing moral dilemma. He has an obligation to his father and an obligation to his mother, and the two seem to conflict, or at least the performance of the one seems to necessitate the disregard of the other. To revenge his father and to spare his mother are almost like two incompatible tasks. The problem of the entire play is Hamlet's attempt to devise means to accomplish both.

Facing, then, this difficulty, and urged once more by the ghost to both undertakings, Hamlet discovers that his mother does not see the ghost. Thinking he is gazing into "the incorporeal air" she becomes alarmed lest he is distracted, or in a "distemper." She, therefore, importunes him in terror, "Whereon do you look?" To this Hamlet replies, "On him, on him!" Then he goes on to say:

"Do not look upon me,  
Lest with this piteous action you convert  
My stern effects."

This conversation is usually taken as further evidence of Hamlet's constitutional inability to carry out any course of action or revenge. It has been assumed that his "stern effects" are converted into weakness or procrastination by the sight of the piteous ghost of his father, and that in the very act of trying to whet Hamlet's dull revenge the ghost succeeds only in further causing delay and inactivity.

This, however, cannot well be the right interpretation of the passage. When the queen asks Hamlet, "Whereon do you look?" he is, of course, looking on

the ghost which she does not see. While talking to his mother he is looking upon the ghost of his father. He says further, referring to the ghost:

"Look you, how pale he glares!  
His form and cause conjoin'd, preaching to stones,  
Would make them capable."

The effect of the appearance of the ghost is, therefore, the very reverse of causing Hamlet to delay, but as when he made his first appearance, he incites him to action:

"Haste me to know 't, that I, with wings as swift  
As meditation or the thoughts of love,  
May sweep to my revenge." (I. v. 29-31.)

With such thoughts in his mind, and with such incentives to action, Hamlet stands rapt in gaze upon his father's ghost. At that moment his attention is drawn to his mother, and he turns to her, only to find her apparently thinking him distracted, and piteously looking upon her son. His next words, then, are addressed to her and not to the ghost:

"Do not look upon me,  
Lest with this piteous action you convert  
My stern effects."

Seeing her piteous actions and her alarm and amazement he fears his compassion for his mother, who is the real object of pity, will rob him of his purpose to kill the king. He therefore begs her not to let her piteous actions deprive him of his stern resolve, and disarm him for the great task of executing vengeance upon the king. If she continue her piteous action he will be led to shed tears rather than blood, and tears "will want true color."

At the last, as at the first, Hamlet finds that the re-

straint placed upon him of not harming his mother in carrying out his great work of revenging his father magnifies the difficulty of his task. When to this is added the other restraint he places upon himself of not harming his native land, it may be seen that his difficulties are almost insuperable. In all his attempts to perform his task he spares his mother and he spares Denmark, and it is only the supreme perfidy of the king that at last leads to the death of the queen and the sacrifice of the life of Hamlet himself.

## NOTE D

### OTHELLO'S COLOR, AND ITS DRAMATIC SIGNIFICANCE

MANY critics and actors seem to have the notion that Othello's color is a matter of no significance in the play. All they see is that he is a man, but a man who happens to be black. Professor Bradley, for instance, says: "Othello's race . . . makes a difference to our idea of him; it makes a difference to the action and catastrophe. But in regard to the essentials of his character it is not important."<sup>1</sup> A few pages later, however—but in a footnote—he admits that "The effect of difference in blood in increasing Othello's bewilderment regarding his wife is not sufficiently realized."<sup>2</sup>

The difference in color between Othello and Desdemona, however, is but the dramatist's device to exhibit to the eye the "difference of blood." Othello's color, therefore, is what marks the difference in blood and character. And no one who reads the text can

<sup>1</sup> *Shakespearean Tragedy*, p. 187.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 193.

doubt that the dramatist has given Othello's color a very great prominence in the play. The play contains no fewer than seventeen distinct references to Othello's color, and it is a strange interpretation of Shakespeare's play that attributes no significance to what the dramatist has so sedulously elaborated.

Apart from the numberless times he is called a "Moor," the following, then, are the passages in the play that refer to Othello's color:

What a full fortune does the thick-lips owe  
If he can carry't thus? (I. i. 72-3.)

Sir, y'are robb'd, for shame put on your gown,  
Your heart is burst, you have lost half your soul,  
Even now, now, very now, an old black ram  
Is tupping your white ewe. (I. i. 94-7.)

Whether a maid, so tender, fair, and happy, . . .  
Would ever have (t'incur a general mock)  
Run from her guardage to the sooty bosom,  
Of such a thing as thou. (I. ii. 82-88.)

A maiden, never bold:  
Of spirit so still, and quiet, that her motion  
Blush'd at herself, and she, in spite of nature,  
Of years, of country, credit, everything  
To fall in love, with what she fear'd to look on;  
It is a judgment maim'd, and most imperfect.  
(I. iii. 113-118.)

My heart's subdu'd,  
Even to the very quality of my lord;  
I saw Othello's visage in his mind,  
And to his honors and his valiant parts,  
Did I my soul and fortunes consecrate.  
(I. iii. 278-282.)

And noble signior,  
If virtue no delighted beauty lack,  
Your son-in-law is far more fair than black.  
(I. iii. 319-321.)

*Desdemona.* How if she be black and witty?  
*Iago.* If she be black, and thereto have a wit,  
She'll find a white, that shall her blackness fit.  
(II. i. 156-8.)

Her eye must be fed. And what delight shall she have to look on the devil? . . . Loveliness in favor, sympathy in years, manners, and beauties: all which the Moor is defective in.

(II. i. 258-263.)

Well . . . come lieutenant, I have a stoup of wine, and here without are a brace of Cyprus gallants, that would fain have a measure to the health of black Othello. (II. ii. 45-48.)

Nor from mine own weak merits, will I draw  
The smallest fear, or doubt of her revolt,  
For she had eyes, and chose me. (III. iii. 216-8.)

She did deceive her father, marrying you,  
And when she seem'd to shake, and fear your looks,  
She lov'd them most. (III. iii. 236-8.)

Ay, there's the point,  
As (to be bold with you)  
Not to affect your proposed matches  
Of her own clime, complexion, and degree,  
Whereto we see in all things, nature tends: . . .  
But (pardon me) I do not in position  
Distinctly speak of her, though I may fear  
Her will, recoiling to her better judgment,  
May fall to match you with her country forms,  
And happily repent. (III. iii. 268-279.)

Haply, for I am black,  
And have not those soft parts of conversation  
That chamberers have. (III. iii. 307-9.)

My name that was as fresh  
As Dian's visage, is now begrim'd and black  
As mine own face. (III. iii. 445-7.)

I think the sun where he was born,  
Drew all such humors from him. (III. iv. 34-35.)

*Æmilia.* Oh, the more angel she, and you the blacker devil.

*Othello.* She turn'd to folly: and she was a whore.

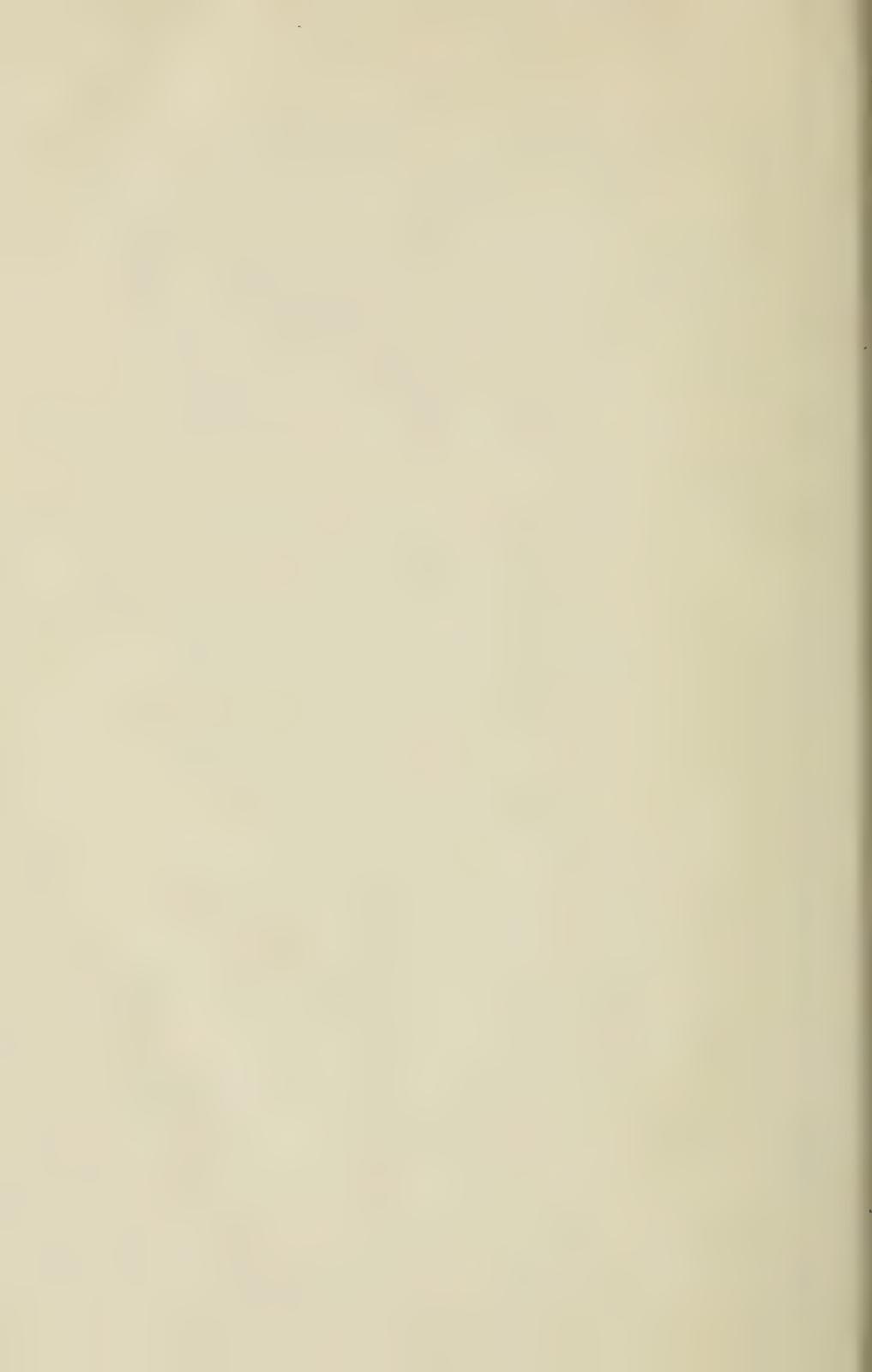
*Æmilia.* Thou dost belie her, and thou art a devil.

(V. ii. 164-6.)

If he say so, may his pernicious soul  
Rot half a grain a day: he lies to th' heart,  
She was too fond of her most filthy bargain.

(V. ii. 194-6.)

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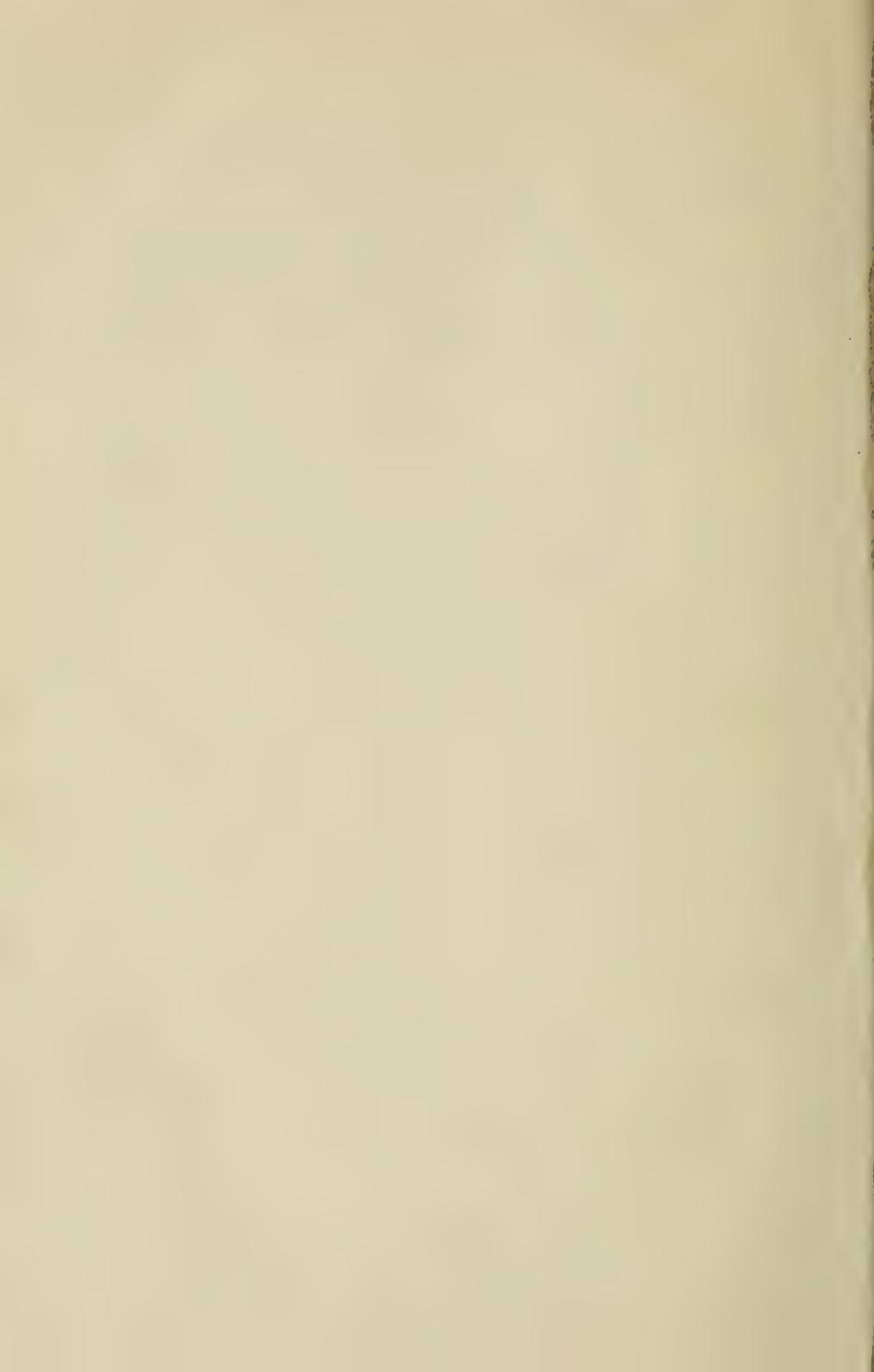
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Crawford, Alexander Wellington  
Hamlet, an ideal prince

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